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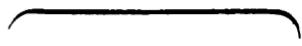


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HOMeward TRAIL

WALDRON BAILY

Chlorophyll (Chlorophylle)



Herr to Lewis Green

Yes it is time he
tried harder than I
bent into the tree
at Penn State.

With all good wishes
Waldron Ba

Nov 15, 1916



THE HOMeward TRAIL



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He noted as never before the slender grace of her form
with its lithe erectness

THE
HOMEWORK TRAIL

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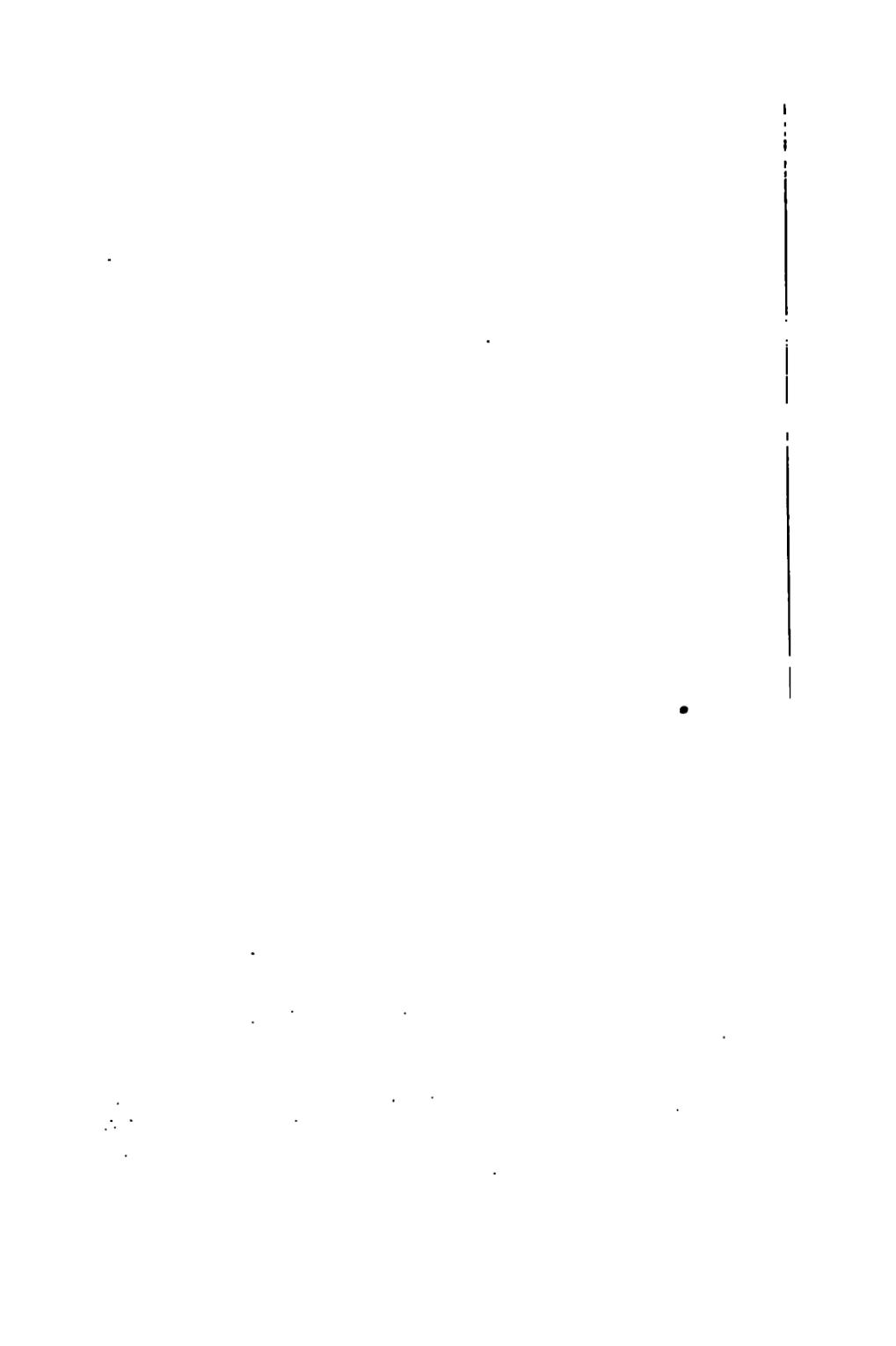
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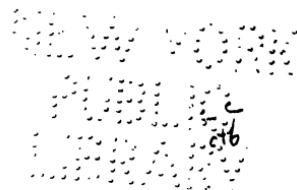
THE HOMeward TRAIL

BY

WALDRON BAILY
AUTHOR OF "HEART OF THE BLUE RIDGE"

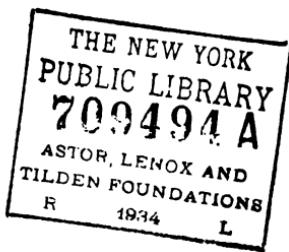
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Illustrations by
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THE HOMEWARD TRAIL

24 X 24 P.



THE HOMeward TRAIL

CHAPTER I

DAVID, sitting under an apple tree, stared with vague eyes toward the thicket of dogwood that bordered on the far side of the orchard. Then, of a sudden, his gaze quickened as there came a movement of the foliage, and a fawn stepped daintily out into the open, where it stood placidly regarding the young man with limpid, friendly eyes. One ear stood out at a right angle from the head; the other was laid back, attentive to something within the thicket. David knew that this something must be Ruth, with whom her fawn wandered everywhere. He stood up expectantly. A moment later, the girl issued from the shelter, and at sight of the youth stopped short beside the fawn, which muzzled her hand in a gentle caress.

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For a little, the boy and the girl were silent, studying each other with intentness, in which was something partly admiration, partly surprise, as if they saw with a new clarity of vision. It was borne in on David with startling abruptness that his childish playfellow of years was a child no longer, was indeed a woman grown, and, too, beautiful. He noted as never before the slender graces of her form with its lithe erectness. His glances roved half-shyly over the delicate contours of the oval face, and he saw that she was very fair. He had known it before, but not as he knew it now in this flash of illumination. An unfamiliar beauty was revealed to him here and now in the red lips curving so tenderly, in the satiny purity of the complexion with its petals of rose in the cheeks and the trace of brown given by the sun, in the aureole of hair that was itself like sunlight, in the lucent blue eyes, which shone with mingled mirth and pride and affection.

Ruth, for her part, in her contemplation of David recognized something unfamiliar. She did not quite understand its significance, but she felt herself half-confusedly abashed by its presence. She sensed dully that her

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boyish companion, as if in the twinkling of an eye, had become of a man's full stature. The thought subtly distressed her, even while it gratified her. So she thrust the idea out of her mind in order that she might greet him again to-day as yesterday.

"Oh, Dave!" she called. There was a warm note beneath the gayety that rang in her tones. "Just think of pappy's trusting you to do all that business for him! I reckon he never let anybody else collect money for him." She laughed as she added: "You know pappy's mighty particular about his money."

David grinned in response.

"Yes, there ain't no two ways about his being almighty close. He sure does make the eagle squawk plumb awful every time he pinches a dollar. I cal'late I'm some proud over his sendin' me with that load of apples."

"It means you're grown up, Dave," Ruth answered, and there was a hint of wistfulness in the music of her voice. Then, because she herself by no means understood the full significance of her words, she went forward quickly with the fawn at her side. When

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she came to where the young man stood, she paused, and put her hands to his cheeks, and, as he bowed his head toward her, lifted her face, and put her lips to his. In the same second, she drew away from him, and her cheeks flamed as they had never flamed before from the kisses she had given him. She stood mute and motionless, with downcast eyes, in a trouble half-shamed, half-sweet.

David, too, stood wordless in a great confusion. The kiss had loosed in him a flood of emotion that thrilled and bewildered. It was as if consciousness were drowned in the tide of feeling. And as in the case of a drowning man the whole life passes in review during a few seconds, so now before the mind of David a scroll was unrolled. But this panorama showed only the kisses of Ruth. They had been frank, free kisses all, some tender, some mischievous, always kindly. For, as to this young man and woman, each was an only child, and, since they lived on adjoining farms, they had always been playfellows. David remembered the day of his first great grief, when from a field whither he had gone to weep alone over the mother

who lay dying, he had seen his father come out of the house and pass down the road toward the village. A great desolation had fallen on him, for the man bore, according to local custom, the measuring stick, which he had cut to the length of his wife's form, and which he would now carry to the carpenter to serve as a measure for the coffin. So the boy had known that his mother was dead. Ruth had come to him in the misery of that hour, had comforted him with her kisses. Again, within the year, when his father went to fight in the Confederate cause, leaving the son in charge of William Swaim, Ruth's father, the girl had welcomed him to his new home with kisses, and had cheered him in his loneliness. When, on his return from a hunting trip with his father in the Blue Ridge Mountains, along the upper reaches of the Yadkin River, he brought her, according to a promise made, a fawn which he had caught, she had showered on him glad kisses of gratitude. There had been other kisses innumerable—joyous, teasing, tender. Here was one of a sort altogether different. In it was something disturbing, something curiously penetrating and potent. It was a

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mystery to this boy who did not yet realize his manhood.

The rough voice of Swaim broke the spell that held the two.

"Drat thet-thar dummed pesky deer t' Tophet! Ye left the corn-crib door open, Dave, consarn ye! An' the ornery critter has done et nigh a full peck o' seed corn, an' thet seed corn's wuth money, by cripes!" The old man glared accusingly in turn at David and Ruth and the fawn, which had slipped away to a little distance as if in conscious acknowledgment of its guilt. David, though aware that he was not at fault in the matter, forbore any attempt at defense, for he had no wish at this time to provoke further his penurious and irascible task-master. Ruth, however, boldly resented this flouting of her pet.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, pappy," she declared spiritedly, "to begrudge a darling little thing like Mollie a few ears of your old corn. And," she added impudently, "likely you left the door open yourself. Dave is a sight more careful than you are, pappy, and you know it."

The father drew his shaggy gray brows

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in a fierce scowl, which the daughter bore undaunted. His voice came with a rasp.

"Git inter the house, Miss High-an'-Mighty, an' help maw with the bakin' an' sweepin' an' sich-like women's tricks, instid o' lally-gaggin' round hyar a-wastin' yer own time an' Dave's."

The scarlet flooded Ruth's cheeks once again at this direct attack, and she retreated in haste, the fawn following. The old farmer turned his frown on David, whom he regarded grimly for a long time. He was a hard man and uncouth. He had a reputation for meanness throughout the community, and it was deserved. In his fashion, doubtless, he loved both his wife and daughter, but they suffered none the less from his penuriousness. His parsimony fretted Mrs. Swaim more than it might have most of the neighboring wives, there among the foothills of the Blue Ridge, in North Carolina, for she was of better birth than her husband, and had even received the advantages of a course in the female seminary at Salem. In her romantic girlhood, her fancy had been caught by the handsome and virile mountaineer. She had been speedily disillusioned. Her

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single compensation was in Ruth, and for her daughter's sake, she had held herself from falling into the slovenly ways and illiterate speech of the community. So, too, she had trained her child as best she knew how in matters of deportment and manner of speaking. William Swaim had no sympathy for any such " 'tarnal foolishness." He demonstrated the fact now by his aspect as he stood glowering at the young man. He was barefooted, and shirt and overalls hung loosely on the tall, thin form. In the deep hollow between the outstanding neck muscles, the huge Adam's apple jumped spasmodically, as he chewed his quid of tobacco, and either spat or swallowed the juice. The face was thin and drawn, brown and wrinkled. The beak-like nose hinted of cruelty and avarice. The sparse gray hair and the tangle of whitening beard were unkempt and frowsy. The eyes were pale and watery, with reddened lids. They were blinking now as he contemplated David with a malevolent distrust, which found expression in his next words.

"Hit's powerful resky trustin' business t'
a harum-scarum galoot what hain't got sense

enough t' lock wanderin' wild beasts outen the corn-crib." David opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it, and permitted the slur to pass unrebuted. "They'll be quite some money a-comin' fer thet-thar load o' limber-twigs apples. I'm puttin' right smart o' confidence in you-all, David, an' I dunno as I had orter 'a' done hit. As I said, it's resky—pizen resky." Having thus relieved his saturnine humor, Swaim became almost cheerful, and spoke alertly. "Time we got busy with the load, t' git hit done come night, so's ye kin start at sun-up t'-morrer."

David followed obediently, even with huge satisfaction. For this commission given him by Swaim to sell the apples in Salisbury, though seemingly such a trifling thing, was in truth a matter of serious importance to those chiefly concerned. To the elder man, the sending forth of the youth was in the nature of a test. David's father and he had been friends as well as neighbors. Naturally enough, by reason of their mutual liking, and, too, by reason of the fact that their farms adjoined, and that each had an only child, they had planned a marriage between their

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children. With more discretion than parents in such cases usually display, they had kept the project secret from those most concerned. Swaim had much liking for the lad, which, however, he was at pains to conceal. His decision to entrust David with the sale of the apples would never have been reached, had he not felt that it was a duty he owed himself to try out the business ability of his daughter's prospective husband. So, to him, a bit of petty marketing carried deep significance.

To David (and to Ruth as well) the matter was serious because it brought to the young man the first real responsibility in his life, and the fact marked his stepping across the threshold that separates boyhood from maturity. A trivial event truly in the judgment of those more sophisticated. Yet, to these primitive folk, the occasion marked an epoch. For that matter, this undertaking apparently so simple was destined to prove the beginning of vital episodes in the lives of David Simmons and Ruth Swaim.

CHAPTER II

BEFORE dawn the following morning, David had thrown the harness on the tassel-tails, as he called the mules, and hitched them to the canvas-hooded wagon laden with apples. A blast of the horn summoned him to the breakfast which Ruth had prepared and now served to him. But there was still constraint between the two, and their words were few and perfunctory. David seemed to give his entire attention to the meal before him, and thus left Ruth free covertly to study the clean-cut features of the young man, framed by the waving black hair. She considered for the first time, with a maidenly wonder that was almost awe and wholly admiration, the breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the slim waist and tapering flanks. It was only when at last he arose from the table with a sigh of repletion that David's black eyes met Ruth's in a long, intent, questioning gaze. Presently,

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the girl's glance wavered and fell, and the color mantled her cheeks. David felt a thrill of exaltation, though he could not in the least understand why.

"I wish you luck, Dave," Ruth said. Her voice was very low, faltering a little. "I'm sure you'll make a good job of it." But she did not offer him a kiss, nor did he ask it.

"Do the best I can," he replied, and hurried out.

Within a minute, he was seated on the driver's seat under the shelter of the projecting canvas top, and, with a savage crack of the long-lashed mule-whip, was off. Craning back for a last look, he saw Ruth in the doorway, who waved her hand to him, and he waved in return. Then, with a great contentment in his heart, he settled himself to the long drive. Though David was too familiar with his surroundings to be deeply stirred by them, nevertheless the beauty of the scene harmonized with his mood, and served to emphasize it. His eyes scanned with pleasure the luxurious tints that the autumn had painted on the foliage of dogwood and oak and sweet-gum. A bob-white called from a thicket, and David whistled a



Then, with a great contentment in his heart, he settled himself to the long drive



response. He listened, without any futile thought of imitating, to the soft and exquisite singing of a mocking bird hidden within the wood. There was no drawback to his satisfaction as he journeyed on. The fall rains had held off, so that the roads were good, and he made excellent progress. Other wagons, similarly loaded, swung into the highway from cross-roads, until David found himself one of a caravan moving leisurely within a cloud of thick, red dust. The song of birds, the murmur of brooks, the rustling of leaves beneath the light wind were overborne by a riot of coarser sounds—the thudding of mules' hoofs on the hard clay, the clanking of harness chains, the creaking of heavy wagons, the bawled oaths of drivers, the hisses and crackling reports of whip-lashes; at the fords, the noise of churned waters, the snorting of the beasts, the raucous laughter and shouted conversations of the teamsters.

At nightfall, the train halted and made camp. David, after he had attended to the mules, fried his bacon and eggs over the common fire. Then he rolled himself in his blanket on the ground beneath the wagon, and fell asleep to the lullaby of strenuously

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strummed banjos that came from the boisterous group still gathered around the fire.

The strangeness of his situation caused David to awake long before the first glimmerings of light. In his eagerness to accomplish the task set him, he at once began his preparations for the road, since he could see clearly enough by the starlight. He had fed the mules, and breakfasted, and started off before anyone else in the camp was stirring. So, it came about that in mid-forenoon he swung the mules on the easterly stretch of the route to Salisbury.

It was as he came close to his destination that for the first time his spirit lost its buoyancy. There before him, on a tract of the rising ground between the town and the river, loomed grimly the high stockade of the Confederate prison. At first glimpse of it, David's thoughts flew to his father, who had been captured, and now languished in some place like this far to the north, under guard of Union soldiers. David had heard much concerning the sufferings of the captives here in Salisbury prison, and, as he pitied them, he was filled with dire forebodings over the fate of his father. Where the road passed

alongside the high stockade, the ground sloped sharply upward, so that from his perch on the wagon seat, he was above the level of the stockade's top, and could look down and behold every detail of the gruesome spectacle within the barrier. David pulled the mules to a standstill, and stared at the scene, fascinated and appalled.

The acres of the inclosure were crowded with a tatterdemalion horde. These men were gaunt starvelings, the wretched, famine-stricken victims of war's cruelty. They were clad in soiled rags of uniform, which flapped grotesquely loose on the emaciated bodies. Through the masks of bushy whiskers showed pallid features, lighted by cavernous eyes. Some were so weakened by privations that they were shivering even in the full warmth of the sunlight. On many, the bandages were witness of wounds still unhealed. Often an arm was lacking; often a leg.

One of those mutilated in the latter fashion first drew David's particular attention, for the cripple stood near the stockade, looking up toward him. He was a young man of about David's age, who, under a happier fate, would just now have been in his prime.

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Like David, too, he was tall and straight, with massive shoulders and a mighty chest. The prisoner's natural attributes of strength made more conspicuous the pathos of his present condition with wan, drawn face and haggard eyes and stooped form hunched on the support of the crutches. One trouser leg dangled empty from the knee.

A sudden livelier gust of wind caught the unfastened canvas curtain on the side of the wagon toward the stockade. The cloth was lifted and thrown back over the framework, so that the heaped apples showed plainly above the side of the box. At sight of them, the cripple's famished face lighted with a consuming desire. After the scant rations of sour corn bread which had been practically his only food for many a weary day, the ruddy richness of the fruit was torture to his need. He cried out shrilly in a voice that quivered from the intensity of his longing.

"Hi, mister! Can't ye spare one of your apples to a poor cuss, who's just about starvin'?" The smile that went with the drawling words was pitiful.

The look in the fellow's eyes pierced David

to the soul. The thought of his father in desperate need like this moved him to generous action. He reached quickly over the back of the seat, picked up an apple, and tossed it over the stockade toward the cripple's eagerly outstretched hands.

The intended kindness was of no avail. Another of the prisoners, who was standing near at hand, had been watching greedily. He, like all others in that place, was ragged and forlorn and obviously very hungry. He was a short, wiry individual of mature age, with the chevrons of a sergeant still showing on his coat-sleeves. A bristling red stubble of beard gave him an appearance of fierceness. Now, as the apple flew through the air toward the cripple, he whirled and sprang with surprising agility. He caught the apple, and bit into it avidly almost before his feet touched the ground. Then he sauntered off, shamefaced, but munching voraciously.

The cries of indignation that had broken from David and the cripple simultaneously caused the other prisoners near by to look in the direction of the sounds. A single glimpse of the apples set them hurrying toward the stockade, calling out in supplication. At

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first, however, David gave no heed to these others. His heart was hot with wrath against the red-whiskered thief who had so meanly despoiled the cripple of his gift. Nevertheless, the remedy was simple. He plucked another apple from the load and tossed it over the stockade. His hasty aim fell a little short. The man on the crutches lurched forward clumsily—too late. A wobegone, tottering relic was suddenly galvanized into life, and pounced upon the spoil. The cripple rested inert, an expression of hopeless misery on his face. David felt a new pang of grief for this sufferer whom as yet he had failed to comfort. He was hot with wrath against those who had thwarted him. Then, in another second, as his ears took in the pleadings of the men massing at the stockade, his anger died and gave place to a new and broader sympathy for these stricken ones. Yet, he was by no means unmindful of the first to win his interest. He was indeed more than ever determined to accomplish his purpose. To that end, he resorted to strategy. He seized a double handful of the apples, and tossed them to either side of the cripple. While the soldiers scrambled for these, he

sent over two others so nicely directed that the cripple easily caught both in his cap. This success delighted David, and his delight was made deeper by the joy that shone in the man's face as he looked up and smiled.

A warm tide of benevolence welled high in the young mountaineer's bosom. He forgot that these men here before him were his enemies. He remembered only their need. Their piteous appeals moved him to a reckless impulse of charity. He no longer thought of the business entrusted to him by William Swaim. His sole concern was to assuage to the full measure of his ability the urgent necessity of these famished prisoners. A philanthropic zeal drove him on. He clambered over the seat and stood among the apples, and threw the canvas side-flap up over the framework of the top. Then, without any hesitation, he began casting the apples over the stockade. The forlorn captives surged toward the barrier, yelling their glee over the precious food that rained on them like manna from heaven. David hurled his kindly projectiles from both hands, fast and furiously. The crowd within the yard swirled hither and yon, following the flight

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of the apples. They chattered and cursed and laughed in an abandon of fantastic happiness over this break in the horrible routine of their imprisonment. David exulted with them.

Some boys, going a-fishing, halted by the wagon to stare round-eyed at the strange spectacle of this young man with the handsome face and flashing eyes and long black hair flying in the wind, who was throwing these great, luscious apples so wildly over the stockade, from behind which sounded the roaring acclamations of the mob.

“Say, give us some, suh!” one of the boys shouted.

David heard the treble cry, and answered it.

“Come on up here, an’ fill your pockets, an’ help me throw,” he commanded.

On the instant, the boys swarmed about him, first filled their pockets, and then gave themselves merrily to this new sport of bombarding the enemy. The many nimble hands made short work of discharging the cargo. A hail of apples filled the air. There was joyous rioting among the prisoners, who just before had been so apathetic in their wretch-

edness. Now, they were suddenly bubbling over with liveliness, romping and chuckling and gloating—and munching. The boys working beside David squealed gibes at their foes, and strove to catch them unawares with apples cunningly aimed. David threw no less fiercely, though with no malicious intent. On the contrary, he was all aflame with the lust of giving. It was with sharp regret that he saw the last apple fly over the palisade. He gave a glance down at the empty wagon-box, and sighed. He made a gesture of dismissal to the boys. As they clambered down from the wagon, David faced the mass of prisoners within the enclosure. He swung his hands, palms out, in a wide gesture.

“They’re all gone, boys!” he called. The note of sorrow in his voice was unmistakable.

For a few seconds, a tense silence rested on the ragamuffin recipients of his bounty. But, in another moment, the grateful men broke into cheers that grew in volume, became a thunderous din of thanksgiving. The pæan of praise was a wonderful music in the ears of David—a music that reached to his heart, and melted it. The tears of a pure happiness misted his eyes. He nodded stiffly,

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in acknowledgment of the cheers, and then in great confusion climbed to his seat, gathered up the reins, and, with a crack of the whip, set the mules jogging.

CHAPTER III

THE whirl of emotion continued without change until, with a shock of surprise, David looked about him and realized that he was in the Salisbury main street. He pulled the mules to a halt mechanically, but did not move from his place. A swift revulsion of feeling battered down his complacent mood, and left him the prey of misgivings which increased in intensity from moment to moment. At last, his consciousness awoke to the nature of his act in yielding to a heedless impulse. He perceived that by the impetuousness of his conduct where he had meant only kindness to those in want he had actually inflicted wrong on the man who trusted him. It was with a feeling of blank despair that he admitted the truth concerning his deed. He had given with noble generosity. Unfortunately, the gifts were not his to bestow. The supplies for his charity had been stolen from William Swaim. That no theft had been intended made no

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difference. The ugly fact remained. The glow of satisfaction was gone now. In its stead came a chill of apprehension. He shivered with dread of what the outcome might be.

David slumped in his seat, and groaned. His dismay was abject. But he made a mighty effort to regain some degree of courage in the face of the disaster he had so unwittingly wrought. He reflected that at least the issue need not be faced for many hours yet, since there remained a long drive homeward. He was sure, with dismal foreboding, that he would be unable to sleep the coming night. There would be time a plenty for consideration and decision as to his course while he lay rolled in his blanket beneath the stars.

Since he had no business in town, thanks to his kindly folly, David turned the mules, and started back drearily along the way over which he had come with such high hopes. As he passed the stockade, he held his eyes studiously averted from the scene of his undoing. But, when he encountered the caravan which he had left behind, he played the hypocrite, and bragged shamelessly in an-

sver to questions concerning the quickness with which he had disposed of his load.

"Got rid of 'em in a jiffy!" he announced quite truthfully. But the triumphant smile that accompanied the words was a lie.

Melancholy drove with David across the miles. His brain grew weary and then numb in the effort to devise some means of relief from the difficulty of his position. The little money left with him by his father had been spent. Though Swaim had made him earn a man's wages, there had been no contract to pay them, and there was no slightest likelihood that the old man meant to expend any money unless compelled to do so. Could he have paid the market value of the apples, the arrangement of the matter would have been simple. He might have been jeered at for the sentimental absurdity of his performance, but that would have been the worst result. There would have been no question of dishonor. But he had thrown away the property of another, while without power to make good his fault by purchase. Yes, he was undoubtedly a thief. William Swaim would not hesitate to call him just that—a thief!

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His forebodings were justified, for that night David did not sleep. Again and again, he went over the event of the morning with increasing bitterness against himself. But, in the course of his unhappy musings, he at last seized on a diversion from his own self-condemnation. It was as he chanced to remember the little, red-whiskered man whose greedy selfishness had interfered at the outset when the first apple was thrown, and had thus been the actual cause of the catastrophe that followed. David's spirit was filled with exceeding bitterness at thought of the man. The feeling increased in intensity until it was very near hate. It comforted him in some degree to charge another with the blame.

An inquisitive opossum came cautiously nosing. David threw a pine knot, and sent the intruder scurrying away. It was just as the first dull gray of the coming dawn lightened the purple black above the eastern hills. And it was in this moment that an inspiration came to David. He smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. The device he had hit upon was palpably flimsy. He was well aware that it by no means met the re-

quirements of his case. The sole merit of the idea was that it afforded a possible, though by no means plausible, pretext for self-justification. Still greatly troubled, but somewhat consoled by the fact that he had a defensive plea in readiness, David breakfasted, and hurried the mules onward. And now, curiously enough, as the distance shortened, he found himself thinking less and less of Swaim's condemnation, and more and more of what Ruth might feel over this thing that he had done. Once again, too, he found himself brooding over those tremors provoked in him by Ruth's last kiss. He tasted a flavor in the remembrance. His pulse quickened, with a tingling in the blood. A flush showed through the tan of his cheeks. His eyes deepened and glowed. And, notwithstanding all this, he did not quite understand the emotion that held him enthralled.

It was still early morning, for he had sent the mules forward at a smart pace, when David swung into the Swaim farmyard. Ruth was busy at the milking, squatting on her heels, using one hand only on the teats and holding the tin cup in the other, according to the custom of the neighborhood. Hear-

ing the rattling of the wagon, she hurried to the stable door, and waved a hand in greeting. Then, as she saw her father come out of the barn, she retreated, for she was not minded to have any witness to her next interview with David.

The old man's cadaverous face was contorted to lines of jubilation. His welcome was unqualifiedly genial.

"Wall, Dave, I didn't 'low t' see ye afore sundown, an' mos' likely not till after breakfast t'-morrer. Ye sure must be some kin t' lightnin'. Them mules don't look like they'd turned a har." As David threw down the reins and alighted from the wagon, Swaim, with a grin of anticipation, stepped close, and extended his right hand, palm up, in readiness to receive his money returns from the trip.

"Thar must be a right smart o' call fer my kind o' limber twigs in Salisbury these days," he cackled in high glee. "Ye'd better fix t' load up an' go right thar ag'in whilst the folks is buyin' so lively-like."

David held himself resolutely erect, and spoke with an assumption of boldness that he was far from feeling.

"Why, Mr. Swaim," he said, in a tone as casual as he could muster, "I got back so quick 'cause I didn't have t' take the apples clean through t' Salisbury. I found a customer on the rise o' the hill where they keep the Yankees that all look so powerful hungry." He forced a smile. "The feller what bought the apples stood right there in the schooner an' done tossed the last of 'em right smack over that-there punchin fence while those poor devils scrambled an' fit t' git holt onto one." A flash of reminiscent enthusiasm made his face radiant. "I tell ye, Mr. Swaim, it was wuth twice the wuth o' the load to see how much good they did them starvin' humans. The feller what bought 'em just couldn't he'p it, 'cause his heart was teched by sufferin'." David gulped, hesitated for an instant, then added firmly: "That feller was me. I hain't nary cent t' pay ye fer 'em. If ye won't wait till pap gits home ag'in, I'll hunt a job t' work it out."

William Swaim's jaw sagged, and he gaped for a few seconds at the young man, dumb from sheer amazement over this revelation. Then, presently, as his mind took in

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the full enormity of David's offense, his face grew ashen, and he trembled. His miserly soul was wrenched by the loss of those dollars he had hoped to fondle. An uncontrollable wrath mounted against the lad who had thus betrayed him. His watery, red-rimmed, blinking eyes cleared suddenly and flamed. He strode a step forward, and lifted a clenched fist.

"Take that, ye damn' thief!" he screamed. His voice came shrill, cracked with rage, as he struck out blindly.

David guarded himself against the attack, but made no offensive movement in return. He was in the full of his strength, while the elder man was old for his years, and by no means strong. The youth had no fear of suffering any serious injury from the vicious assault, and so limited himself to defensive measures in which he was successful enough. He had no wish to aggravate his fault by thrashing the man he had already injured so dolorously in the pocketbook. Moreover, he could not forget that William Swaim was the father of Ruth, and as such necessarily immune from violence at his hands.

Ruth, having just finished her milking, heard

her father's shouted words, and echoed them with a stifled shriek of alarm. She dropped the cup of milk, and raced toward the barn. She was just in time to see her father, more than ever infuriated by his failure to break down David's guard, turn and leap to a pitchfork lying on the barn floor. Armed with this dangerous weapon, he again faced David. Ruth knew well the peril of the moment, for she was aware that her father possessed a temper which, though usually controlled, was when unleashed a madness that knew no bounds. The pitchfork was almost at her breast when she hurled herself between the two men, and cried out wildly to her father to stop.

William Swaim halted, a dazed expression on his face at the unexpectedness of the girl's intervention.

"Oh, pap," Ruth gasped, "ain't you ashamed of acting like that with Dave—Dave been so kind and helpful to us all!"

The old man was checked, but the wrath still flared. He retorted with such haste that the words came stammeringly.

"He'pful!" he sneered. "He's a thief—

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thet's what he is. He done stole my apples, my limber twigs what meant real money fer me. An' he's wuss nor a thief—he's a fool, plumb daffy, fer he says he done fed 'em t' the Yank' pris'ners down t' Salisbury. But I don't swaller no sech lie like that-thar. Nary thief kin stuff Bill Swaim that-away s'long's he loves the lady on the dollar."

The outbreak of speech had served as a safety-valve for Swaim's fury. David realized that the father would not assault him further in the daughter's presence. For the time being at least, the crisis was past. He put his hands on Ruth's shoulders, and swung her about to face him. Even in this moment of stress, he noted with a thrill of new delight the loveliness of her flushed face, the splendor of the violet eyes that met his so steadfastly and so loyally. Then his lips twisted to a whimsical smile, and he spoke in a tone half of raillery, half of seriousness.

"I'm plumb guilty, Ruth," he declared. "I'm jest that-there fool what your pap spoke of. But I done stole the apples t' feed starvin' humans—not fer love o' the lady on the dollar."

"Tell me!" Ruth urged. Both she and David had forgotten William Swaim, who lowered the pitchfork until the prongs touched the ground, and then stood leaning on the handle, staring malevolently at the young man.

David told his story with great earnestness. He suddenly felt that the most important thing in the world was to make Ruth understand exactly what had occurred. Nothing else mattered if only he could retain her good opinion. To this end he recounted his adventure in detail from the first blowing back of the canvas flap by the wind through all the incidents to the final scene with her father. And through it all Ruth listened breathlessly, at the outset astounded by the extraordinary happening, soon sympathetic, and finally happy over his generous impulse.

Swaim, too, listened. Somehow, greatly to his surprise, he felt his anger passing. He forgot in part his sorely wounded avarice. Now that he had sustained the first shock to his greed, he gave ear to the narrative with a curious mingling of emotions. Against his will, he was compelled to a feeling of

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admiration for this lad who had robbed him in a fit of extravagant generosity. Moreover, he was ashamed now that he had let his temper so master him. He was horror-struck at thought of what he might have done, had Ruth not interposed between him and his mad desire. Remorse gnawed at his heart. Lest he reveal the softening of his spirit, he stealthily moved away, and passed out of sight behind the barn.

Ruth and David took no note of Swaim's departure. They were absorbed in each other, and in the story the young man told.

As he ended, the girl exclaimed in praise:
"Oh, it was splendid of you, Dave! I love
you for it!"

There was no thought now of the embarrassment created between them by that last kiss in the orchard. She threw her arms around David's neck, and, with the ease of old habit, lifted her mouth to his, and kissed him.

Even in the act, recollection came to her, and the blood flooded her cheeks. She would have drawn back, but it was too late; their lips were already joined. And at the contact she felt a vibrant joy that eddied in

every atom. Thought ceased. There was only an exquisite rapture that pervaded all her being. Her senses seemed to fail. But nothing mattered—only the bliss singing in her heart. David's arms were like bands of steel about her, holding her close, so close! as if he would never let her go. And she had no wish save to be held thus always. His lips lay on hers like a flame that thrilled through the flesh to warm and gladden the soul.

For David understood at last the mystery that had so baffled him. In that second when she threw herself before him to save him from her father's frenzy his heart had leaped in an emotion deeper and sweeter and nobler by far than gratitude. He recognized that emotion for what it was—the love of a woman, concerning which hitherto he had only guessed crudely. The very intimacy through all the years of adolescence between him and Ruth had served to prevent his thinking of her as other than a sister, a comrade. Now, however, he knew her for the concrete verity of vaguely tender reveries. She was the one woman. He held her crushed to his bosom, and his lips were

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eager. He was exultant, masterful in the joy of possession. He loved her, and he knew that she loved him. Her lips told him that in silence. Nothing else in the universe mattered at all.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER a long interval, the lovers drew apart. They glanced about them with a guilty air, and were relieved that no one was observing them. They were both very happy, but, too, after the period of abandonment, they were now a little confused and embarrassed toward each other, made self-conscious by the bigness of this thing that had developed in their lives with such amazing suddenness.

It was David who first returned to prosaic thought. His gaze chanced to fall on the empty wagon. The sight of it brought back to memory the evil fashion in which Swaim had reviled him as a thief. The radiance of his face vanished. In its place came a somber darkening. His eyes hardened, and his lips set in lines of grim determination.

"I've gotter git out," he said curtly to Ruth, who stared at him in astonishment over the abrupt change in his manner. His

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voice was gentle, but held a stern note of resolve.

"Why, what do you mean, Dave?" the girl asked anxiously.

"I must git out o' here t'-night," was the answer. "I'm goin' somewhere t' earn a bit o' money fer a bill I'm owin' t' William Swaim."

"No, no!" Ruth remonstrated. Her heart sickened at the thought that she must lose this lover whom she had only just found.

David shook his head obstinately, and the firmly modeled chin was thrust forward a little.

"There's no two ways about it," he declared. "It will be powerful hard t' leave ye, Ruth, just after we've got t' be sweethearts, but it can't be helped. I can't thrash yer pap, Ruth—jest 'cause he's an old man, an' 'cause he's yer pap. An' if I can't lick him, why, I just naturally gotter pay him fer them apples." His face lightened a little as he smiled wryly. "T' pay him I got t' git money, an' t' git money I got t' git out o' here."

"I know pap better than you do, Dave," Ruth argued. She was eager to change his

decision, even though an instinct told her that her hope was in vain. "Pappy has an awful temper, and he's pretty close. He just flew off the handle, and didn't know what he was doing. He's all over his mad by now, and mighty ashamed of himself. And, anyhow, he knows you're good for the money. 'Tisn't as if your father was poor."

David shook his head once again.

"My pap's money ain't any help, 'cause there's no way fer me t' git hold of any of it till he comes back from that-there prison up North. Ye see, Ruth, I ain't hankerin' t' 'company none with Bill Swaim till I pay him an' prove I ain't the damn' thief what he called me." There was a tone of finality in the utterance, which the girl recognized. She yielded to it, though bitterly reluctant.

"When will you go, Dave?" she inquired, almost timidly.

"Sometime in the night," David replied; "like a thief should." He disregarded Ruth's protest. "An' don't ye breathe a word about it t' yer pap er yer mammy."

"But if I told pappy, he might—" Ruth began.

David interrupted her.

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"Not a word t' yer pap, Ruth," he commanded. The girl yielded, though somewhat grudgingly.

"I suppose I must do as you say," she pouted. "Wherever do you 'low to go, Dave?" There was a tremor of curiosity in her voice, and she added pleadingly: "Oh, don't go far away, dear!"

The young man regarded her with great tenderness.

"Not a mite further than I have t'," he declared. "I ain't noways pinin' t' be shet o' ye, Ruth. An' ye can bet that I'll come back a-runnin' the first chance I git."

The conversation ended in new caresses between the lovers, which left them palpitating with happiness, the more intense because it had for a background the shadow of a parting so soon to come.

Throughout his work that day, David's brain was teeming with contradictory plans concerning the direction his journey should take. He decided after long consideration that his best hope of speedy success with the undertaking would lie in following the Yadkin River down to Georgetown in South Carolina, where in all probability em-

ployment might be found. Or perhaps he might strike across inland from Georgetown to Charleston, on the coast, where the opportunity would be still greater.

No words were passed between David and Swaim at meals. Mrs. Swaim, whose delicate face showed the ravages wrought by the sorrows of an uncongenial marriage, betrayed by her nervous manner that she knew of what had occurred between the two men, but neither she nor her daughter made any reference to David's trip to Salisbury or its unfortunate outcome. After supper Ruth found an opportunity to speak alone with David in the orchard where he had gone to smoke his pipe.

"You're really going to-night?" she queried, when they had kissed each other.

"Yes," David answered simply. He explained to her his purpose of going down the river in his skiff. "I'll slip away as soon as the old folks are asleep," he concluded.

"I'll make you a package of provisions," the girl promised. There came a ripple of laughter. "Pappy won't know. Mammy will, but she won't mind. She'll be glad."

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The girl was serious again now. "Mammy likes you, Dave."

The lover was a bit confused by this indirect praise. He spoke sheepishly, but with sincerity.

"Yer mammy's a fine woman."

But Ruth, though usually a dutiful daughter and affectionate, was not now interested in her mother's excellence. Her whole interest was absorbed by this being who had been her playfellow and intimate companion for years, yet to-day was revealed to her as a stranger—the lover whom she adored and whom, because he was her lover, she did not feel that she knew at all. The mystery of the new relation fascinated her. And by so much as there was charm in the present relation by so much there was grief at thought of the coming separation.

"I'll bring the package of rations down to the boat," she said. "I'll have it ready for you by ten o'clock." She regarded him accusingly as if she had subconsciously detected in his mind some idea of evasion. "Don't you dare to go before I get there."

And David assured her that he would not, and ratified the pledge with many kisses.

They were not night-owls in the Swaim household. By nine o'clock all had gone to bed—ostensibly. As a matter of fact, Swaim and his wife had duly retired, and had almost immediately fallen asleep. David and Ruth, however, were wide-awake. On going to his room after supper, the young man at once busied himself with the modest preparations for departure. It was indeed a simple matter to pack in his carpet-bag the few articles of a very limited wardrobe. When his preparations had been completed, he sat down by the window, and comforted himself with a pipe while awaiting the lapse of time sufficient to insure sound sleep on the part of the elder Swaims. Finally he struck a match and saw by the flare that his watch marked almost ten o'clock. Carrying his shoes in one hand, and the carpet-bag in the other, with his rifle in the crook of the arm, he crept out of the room in his stocking feet, and made his way with as little noise as possible over the board flooring that creaked alarmingly under his weight, past the bedroom door through which sounded William Swaim's raucous snores and the softer breathing of the woman, and on down the

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stairs. He entered the lean-to kitchen, and felt his way through the darkness to the pantry door, which stood ajar. He whispered Ruth's name. There was no answer, and he guessed that the girl had finished her task already, and had gone on before him down to the river. He was confirmed in this belief, when, after recrossing the kitchen, he found the back door standing half-open. Sure that he would find her waiting for him by the boat, he went out into the night.

After the dense dark within the house, the night seemed well lighted with starlight streaming from the cloudless heavens and the golden glory of the hunter's moon. The tension under which David had been acting was suddenly relaxed as he felt the spell of the night's serenity. The hush of an infinite peace encompassed him, and for a long minute, he stood motionless, yielding to the charm of it. A tang of autumn chill was in the air. The young man filled his lungs with a deep breath, which at once soothed and stimulated him. Then, abruptly, his thoughts veered to the girl who waited for his coming by the river. Now, as he looked on the still splendors of the night, he saw them as

the fit setting for the loveliness of Ruth. Instantly, he was impatient to be with her, and set off running lightly down the lane that led to the river. He covered the quarter of a mile quickly. As he drew near where the skiff was moored, the girl caught a glimpse of him.

“Dave?” she called questioningly. There was a hint of anxiety underlying the music in the soft utterance, which David, in his happier mood, missed altogether.

“Supplies all stored aboard, eh?” he questioned in his turn, by way of answer.

Ruth tried rather unsuccessfully to meet his gayety in kind.

“Ay, ay, sir,” she replied briskly. “Ship’s fully provisioned for the voyage, captain.” Despite her effort, the words came quavering a little. And now David perceived the distress she was striving to conceal. He swept her into his arms, and kissed her many times.

“Ye mustn’t be unhappy, Ruth,” he commanded with a gentleness that was none the less authoritative. “I couldn’t bear t’ think o’ ye mournin’ here while I’m out there in the world.”

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The girl understood that he had no thought of giving up his purpose to save her from grief. The idea had not even occurred to him. She called it to his attention, but quite hopelessly.

"Can't you stay with me, Dave?" she asked, and in the inflection of the words was a prayer that he would.

Dave spoke sternly.

"I've done got t' square my debt t' yer pap. There ain't no other way." His voice softened, and he held the girl closer as he went on speaking: "But I'll be a-pinin' fer you-all, Ruth, all the time I'm away. An' it'll seem a mighty long time, too."

"You don't reckon it will really be very long, do you, Dave?" the girl asked, with a pathetic inflection of dismay at the suggestion.

"Shucks! No, o' course not. 'Twon't take scarcely any time wuth mentionin' t' earn enough t' pay fer them cussed limber twigs. An' the minute I git a holt on the money, I'll come a-runnin'. An' I won't be scramblin' back so all-fired fast jest fer the sake o' seein' yer pap ag'in. It's you-all my eyes an' my lips will be achin' fer." He kissed

her hair very gently, again and again. The perfume of it was like incense to him. The parting so near at hand pained him, but he felt that he must not give way to his own sorrow, since she must need his greater strength to comfort her in her womanly weakness. He patted her back in a clumsy effort to console.

Ruth stood clinging to him with her head buried in his bosom. She was crying softly, with little muffled sobs. This separation was to her a very terrible thing. It seemed to her that its coming thus immediately after their mutual confession of love made it all the more dreadful. There had been no time to realize the intercommunion of their hearts before a cruel fate interposed to thrust them apart. Even had matters stood merely on the former friendly footing between them, she must have found the abrupt departure of David a cause for suffering. Now, since the intimacy between them had developed into a mutual passion, she was stricken to the soul that the man she loved should go from her and leave her in desolate loneliness.

Ruth ceased weeping after a time, though she had heard but dully the murmured en-

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couragement and endearments with which David sought to cheer her flagging spirits. The change in her was due chiefly to a sudden thought that the expression of her despair would tend to make her lover too unhappy. So, with the instinct of self-sacrifice that is natural to the fond woman, she used all her strength of will to cast off the external signs of depression in order that she might not inspire melancholy in David when he most required courage for his adventuring out into the world. She raised her face and gave him kiss for kiss, and joyous words of love and trust. The young man responded gladly. He spoke with confidence of the future, of his hopes for a speedy return to her arms, of the perfect life they would live together through the long years to come.

It was midnight when the last farewell was spoken between them, and David pushed the skiff from the shore, and let it swing into the current of the river. The girl stood tense in restraint on the land, peering with dilated eyes to detect the final bit of shadow moving over the water, which gave the vague outline of the man she loved. And David, looking back as the boat drifted slowly down

the stream, held his gaze fast to that gray silhouette, dimly seen beneath the moonlight on the shore, which was Ruth—Ruth, his sweetheart! Then, presently, the ghostly figure vanished in the mist-wraiths, to be seen no more. A pang of infinite loneliness pierced David's breast as the vision of the girl faded from his view. For long moments he sat brooding, disconsolate and rebellious over the destiny that tore him from her. But, presently, the peace of the night touched him again with its benediction, and his sorrow fell from him. His fancy turned to the adventure that awaited him in the coming days. He bent to the oars and sent the skiff forward with long steady strokes. And as he sped on through the night, he was no longer lonely, for he was accompanied with his dreams.

CHAPTER V

FOR some hours David rowed steadily, though with a leisurely stroke. But on passing beyond that portion of the river most familiar to him, he gave over rowing, and with an oar for rudder, was content to let the skiff float lazily with the sluggish current. He chose this method of journeying not so much to escape fatigue as for the sake of caution. The waters of the winding stream were usually shallow, and although his craft was flat-bottomed with a draft of only a few inches, it was necessary to steer with care to avoid driving on one of the projecting rocks. So, the progress was slow, yet made with a luxurious ease that suited the traveler's mood and left him free for pleasant reverie. There was something almost hypnotic in that silent, stately floating over the velvet dark surface, between serried sentinel ranks of poplars and sycamores, which lined either shore. The moon dropped

toward the western horizon so that the boat moved within the heavy shadows of the trees, and David guided it almost by instinct rather than by sight. The moon dipped lower swiftly and set. The scene became weird; a vague and melancholy vista. A breeze sprang up before the dawn. The air grew colder, so that David felt the dank chill of it, and shivered. He shook off the sense of oppression that crept upon his spirits, and determined to make camp on shore.

He sent the boat rustling through the reeds that opposed their frail barrier between the channel and the bank. The skiff's bow lifted and slid up easily on a sandy beach. David clambered out. His movements were stiff at first from his hours of sitting during the cool night. But, very soon, his blood quickened its flow, his muscles became warm and supple again. His simple preparations were speedily made. The boat was uptilted on its side, propped in position by the oars, to serve as a wind-break. He did not trouble to cook a meal, but was satisfied with a few mouthfuls of cold meat. Then he rolled himself snugly in his blanket, and almost within the second was fast asleep.

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The sun was hours high when finally David stirred, yawned noisily, stretched his muscles until the joints crackled in protest, and sat up. His mood was harmonious with the joyous day, and he felt a cheerful readiness to fare forward on his quest. He was beset with a ravenous hunger, and hurried the preparation of hot food from his store of corn meal, bacon and coffee. Then, replete, he resumed his journey.

For three days, David followed the course of the river at his ease. By night he would lie up in some sheltered nook on the bank, and by day he would drift with the current, rowing only occasionally in the more open and level stretches of water. The weather held fair, so that he suffered no discomfort from this source. The food supplies were ample for his needs, and he added to them with game that fell to his rifle. Flocks of wild duck and geese were frequent. Often as he rounded a bend of the river he would find them clustered thick before him. More than once his bullet caught a green-headed mallard before it could rise into the air.

It was on the third day, when he had traversed a distance of perhaps seventy-five

miles from the Swaim homestead, that David, at nightfall, drew near the city of Salisbury. Though unfamiliar with the river itself in this direction, he was able to recognize his surroundings by certain landmarks. Chief among these was the stockade of the Confederate prison, which loomed through the gloaming, sinister and hideous, on the higher ground above the river. The sight of it, thus vaguely seen at dusk, touched the adventurer's spirit with an unreasoning bitterness. He was not in the least repentant for what he had done here in a flush of generous enthusiasm. But just now he keenly regretted the miles that lay between him and the girl he loved. Here was the cause of their separation, and he loathed it accordingly. Then, inevitably, his thought jumped to the red-whiskered man, who had been first to rob the cripple, and thereby had precipitated the catastrophe. David felt a flare of fury against this fellow, as he had before while returning from Salisbury. Now, however, his feeling was even fiercer, for this conscienceless rogue by his theft had come between the lovers. A surge almost of hatred swept up in the lad's bosom. His fingers

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twitched convulsively, as if he longed to be at grips with the man, to thrash into him some sense of decency in his conduct toward cripples.

A faint, bell-like rhythm came down on the breeze. It seemed to issue from the direction of the stockade, and moment by moment it grew louder. David knew the sound, and his pulse quickened. He had meant to push on to the ferry landing a little way below, where the flat-bottomed scow was still poled across the stream, when any traveler blew a summons on the tin horn. He had intended to camp there for the night, and thence to walk the two miles into Salisbury next morning, to inquire for possible news of his father. But now he forgot the swift approach of night in this new interest in the sound borne to his ears by the wind. With a thrust of his steering oar he turned the skiff's bow to the shore. The bank here was high and steep, and the current ran swiftly. He caught hold of an out-jutting branch from a birch that grew on the shore, and so held the boat from being swept on. The rhythmic booming noise sounded more loudly. It was the baying of hounds.

The instinct of the chase set David quivering with excitement. What the quarry of the dogs might be he had no means of knowing, but he guessed that they must be on the trail of either a fox or a deer. He hoped that it might be the latter. His mouth watered at the possibility of venison broiled over the coals for supper. Still keeping the skiff in position by his grip on the bough, he seized the rifle with his right hand in readiness for instant action if the prey should come his way. Thus prepared, he stood poised, listening intently.

There could be no doubt that the chase was drawing nearer. There seemed every likelihood that the fleeing creature was striving to reach the river in a last desperate effort to escape its pursuers. The light was going fast now, but in the open space of the river it was still sufficient to afford a fair aim.

A crackling sound came from the underbrush that covered the shore. The noise of it increased. David wondered at the volume of it. Even a stag running its swiftest could hardly go crashing like that. It was heading straight for him, too—whatever the

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thing might be. He still hoped it would prove to be a deer, although he doubted. The floundering body bursting through the thickets was almost upon him. He knew that in another second, unless pulled down by the dogs, it must break from the concealment of the woods. It was so close that there could be no danger of losing his opportunity by letting the boat drift, and he must have both hands for the shot. He loosened his clutch on the branch, the skiff dropped down the river. Even as it moved with the current, there was a final clatter of broken boughs at the edge of the high bank. A bulky something leaped from the shadows there, and hurtled forward in a long arc toward the water. And in that same second when the boat began to move, David's rifle sprang to his shoulder, and his eyes lined the sights on the thing chased by the dogs. But the weapon did not belch its deadly missile. Instead, a gasping cry of horror broke from David's lips; his forefinger fell from the trigger as if palsied.

“Good God! an’ I almost got him!”

He shuddered, and felt a nausea.

“It’s a man—an’ I almost got him! I

might have killed him! It was a powerful close squeak. An' I thought I was jest a-gunnin' fer supper!"

David sat staring in fascinated horror at the man who had thus escaped the trailing of the hounds, which now whimpered their distress from the shore. The fugitive had gone beneath the surface at his plunge. When he reappeared, spluttering, he started swimming at full speed toward the farther bank of the river, fifty yards away. But the shock of the cold water put too great a strain on his body, weakened and overheated as he was by his flight from the hounds. Suddenly, he uttered a shrill cry, threw up his hands, and sank.

The skiff, unchecked, had floated a considerable distance down stream. David was too far away to give immediate succor. But he lost no time before acting. In a moment he had dropped the rifle, and the oars were placed. He tested their strength in short, jumping strokes that sent the boat swiftly toward where the body must be swept along in the current.

It was the shallowness of the stream that gave David the chance of rescue. He caught

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a glimpse over his shoulder of the drowning man's form being swept over a sand strip hardly submerged. He was able to bring the skiff alongside before reaching deeper water, which would have made his task difficult, if not impossible. He dropped his oars, and caught the half-unconscious man by the shirt collar. When he had secured a safe grip under the arms, he was able to get the fugitive aboard, thanks to the steadiness of his clumsy flat-bottomed skiff. This accomplished, he stretched the victim face downward, supported by a thwart under his belly, and proceeded first to empty him of the water and then to restore him to full consciousness by such vigorous methods as he knew. The treatment was, in fact, remarkably efficacious, so that within a few minutes, the man, after a final bit of strangling, aroused to consciousness with a piteous appeal for mercy from further ministrations.

David, greatly pleased with this result, lifted the fellow and turned him, so that he was in a sitting position. It was then, with his face close to that of the man he had pulled from the river, that David saw the features

clearly. 'At sight of them he started back with an exclamation of disgust.

"You!" he grunted savagely.

The irony of fate had made him the rescuer of the one man in the world against whom he cherished a grudge. He felt bitterly toward William Swaim, who had called him a thief. But he knew the justification for the old man's anger, and the fact that it was due to his own fault kept him from nourishing resentment. That fault on his part, however, had come as the direct effect of another man's mean action. The red-whiskered Union prisoner, who had stolen the first apple meant for the cripple, was the real cause of all the trouble. David had cursed that greedy prisoner often. Now he cursed once again, for it was the red-whiskered individual whom he had just saved from drowning and who now sat before him, gasping and shivering from his immersion in the chill stream. The young man made no secret of his feeling, but let his mood gush forth in stinging words.

"Ye thievin', hard-hearted Yank! As if ye hadn't given me trouble 'nough a'ready. Ye'r' a plumb-ornery scallywag, a-stealin'

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the apple I done throwed t' a cripple. I ain't aimin' t'save sich as you-all from bein' et by dogs er drownded. Hang yer carcass! Go ashore an' let them dogs chaw ye up piecemeal as ye deserve. Er ye can drown. Git out, I'm tellin' ye!"

The man, who had been dazed at the outset by David's violent denunciation, now in his turn recognized the young man who had thrown the apples over the stockade. Weakened by the peril through which he has just passed, he would have pleaded for mercy from the stalwart young man who stood over him so threateningly. But he had no time. As he shrank from the fierceness of the other's speech, David moved closer. When he ceased speaking, the mountaineer, in a final access of fury, picked up the wretched fugitive, and tossed him overboard toward the shore.

CHAPTER VI

AS the unfortunate victim of adversity disappeared under water with a huge splash, David jumped to the oars, which he plied briskly to hold the skiff against the current. He had no fear lest the man drown, since he had tossed him into the shallows close to the shore under the bluff. But his indignation was not yet satisfied, and he meant to tell the fellow a few more candid truths concerning thieves and Yankees and oppressors of cripples. He only waited until the escaped prisoner should be in a position to give him due attention.

For the moment, the soldier was in too serious a plight to listen even to the worst abuse. He managed to get to his feet after hard struggling and stood tottering and choking from the water he had swallowed. The river rose to his armpits, and it was evident that he had need of all his strength to withstand the sweep of the current. When

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he had cleared his lungs a little, he moved with clumsy, staggering caution toward the shore. He slipped, and only with difficulty saved himself from going down. Plainly, the man was almost at the end of his resources. David in the boat two rods away could hear the hiss of the hurried, painfully drawn breath, the panting sigh with which it was exhaled. The mountaineer was touched with compunction. The fires of his anger died. He felt ashamed of the harshness he had displayed toward one who, whatever his fault had been, was now deserving of pity at least for the suffering he had undergone already and those which he still faced. David was influenced, too, by the fact that the Union soldier made no plea to him for mercy, but maintained a stoical silence as he battled against the clutch of the stream.

The sympathy that stirred in David's bosom was quickened to action by a new factor in the situation. The dogs, at the place on the river bank from which the fugitive had leaped into the water, had been attracted by the sound of David's voice at the point below to which the boat drifted, or they had

caught the scent of their prey borne toward them on the wind. They came charging along the shore and only halted when they reached the high overhanging bank opposite their quarry. They rushed to the brink, but slunk back, unwilling to make the plunge down into the stream. They bayed and whimpered and growled with bared fangs. Even were the soldier to keep his precarious footing and escape out of the grip of the current, he would still have the bloodhounds to face, and they would be ruthless.

David had declared that he wished the fellow might be thrown to the dogs, but he had said this in a gust of wrath. Now that the reality threatened, he was horror-struck at the possibility of such a fate for any fellow human being. Moreover, there came to him in this tense moment a thought of his own father in the Northern prison, who might be in flight as this man and fighting to escape with his life from merciless foes. David felt the impulse to help the hapless Union soldier against his adversaries, even as he would wish some Northern lad in a position like his own to give aid to his father. And,

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too, he was moved by an instinctive sympathy in favor of one against whom the odds were so heavy.

Now, another weight was dropped in the balance to make David's decision in behalf of the fleeing prisoner. A noise of shoutings sounded out of the woods some distance back from the river bank. There could be no doubt that these cries came from the guards who were in pursuit of the fugitive, and were now hastening in the direction indicated by the baying of the bloodhounds. If assistance were to be of avail, no time must be lost. The man himself was incapable of avoiding recapture. He had managed to approach more closely to the bank, and stood where the water was not above his waist line. But it was apparent that his strength was well-nigh exhausted. Even in the fading light he was visibly shivering from his contact with the stream. In his weakened condition, it would be manifestly impossible for him to breast the current and gain the farther shore of the river. On the bank before him, the dogs waited, frantic with desire to set upon him, to rend and throttle him. The beasts would be reinforced by the



With a strong push on the oars, he sent the skiff shoreward



pursuing men, whose shouts indicated that they were rapidly drawing nearer.

David hesitated no longer. With a strong push on the oars, he sent the skiff shoreward. He saw that the man feared his approach, naturally enough, for the fellow began a stumbling progress up stream away from the advancing boat. After the treatment he had meted, the mountaineer could not wonder that he was regarded as an enemy. He called out to advise the soldier of his change of heart.

"I cal'late mebbe I was a mite ha'sh. Leastways, I ain't a-goin' t' see yè et up by them durn bloodhounds." The man had halted at David's placating address, and the skiff now drew close to him. "I 'low I'm plumb foolish, but I aim t' git ye across the stream away from them dogs an' the humans, too. Jest ye climb in here right-smart spry. There ain't no time fer shennanigin."

The miserable object of the young man's compassion had no choice but to obey, though the expression on his face was of mingled alarm and perplexity over the kindly offer from the one who had just treated him with heartless violence. It is likely that he sus-

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pected the lad in the skiff of being either drunk or crazy—a belief easy enough in view of the rapid and amazing inconsistencies in conduct. This astonishing and dangerous person had first rescued him and then thrown him out to drown, and now promised to rescue him yet once again. But, since he had no choice, he yielded to David's impatient command, and with much difficulty, due to his weakened state, managed to climb awkwardly over the side of the skiff, which the mountaineer held balanced against his weight. Then, the tension of his effort relaxed, he rolled on the boat's bottom in a huddled heap of misery, shuddering and groaning. The instant he was aboard, David bent to his oars, and sent the skiff at full speed out into the channel of the river.

The shadows of night had drawn down until even in mid-stream it would be difficult for those on the shore to pick out the shadowy movement of the boat. David made all haste, increasing his speed a little as the voices of the men indicated their arrival at the bank. Since no new outcry came from those assembled there, the mountaineer was sure that the presence of the boat had not

been detected. But he continued rowing down stream with the current as swiftly as possible for a long way, until full darkness had settled over land and water. No sound or movement came from the collapsed form of the fugitive, except a feeble moaning and now and then a convulsive trembling. As David felt the chill of the autumn night, it occurred to him that the exhausted man in his drenched garments might suffer seriously from the exposure. He rowed in toward the shore opposite the prison, and peered sharply through the shadows for a landing place. He made out a tiny cove, and beached the skiff on the shelving sand. Then he busied himself alertly in caring for this enemy whom he had saved from the cruelty of the elements and beasts and men. The fellow, half-unconscious, yielded himself to David's hands without any attempt at resistance. The young man stripped off the sodden garments, and then rolled the soldier snugly in a blanket, and bestowed him in the bottom of the boat. This done, he launched the skiff again, and continued on down the river steadily throughout the long hours of darkness, until a ghostly gray

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stealing into the horizon told that the dawn was near. Then, once more, he turned the boat's bow toward the western shore. After some search, he found an excellent landing in a little bay, where the entrance was almost concealed from any passing on the river by a luxuriant growth of reeds and alders. Pine woods ran down to the shore, offering protection from the wind, and affording abundant fuel. Here David made his camp. The escaped prisoner, who was now sleeping soundly, and whose moaning had ceased, was left undisturbed in the skiff where it was drawn up on the gravelly shore. Soon, a brisk fire was burning. David spread out the soldier's tattered garments close by the blaze to dry. Then he betook himself to the preparation of a meal, for which he himself, having worked through the afternoon and the night without any supper, was nearly as ravenous as he knew his starving companion must be.

The savory odor of sizzling bacon and eggs penetrated to the consciousness of the famished fugitive. Hardly had the bubbling begun in the skillet which David held over the coals when the soldier, although a moment be-

fore sunk in profound slumber, suddenly sat up, sniffing rapturously. Drawn as the steel to the magnet, he got to his feet and climbed out of the boat and hurried toward the fire. He was not checked at all by the discovery that he was stark naked. He merely pulled the blanket about him Indian fashion, and went on.

David nodded in recognition of the man's need.

"Ready in a minute," he vouchsafed.

When presently the fellow had been supplied with a tin plateful of the hot food, David was moved to new pity by the manifest hunger the man displayed. He let his own appetite go unsatisfied for a little in order to give his guest another helping. Then he cooked a second mess, which he divided between the two of them.

When the meal was ended, the mountaineer shifted into his best suit of clothes, and gave the other to the soldier, who, he now learned, was named Sam Morris. The clothes were ridiculously large for the Yankee, but they were whole and decent and he was pathetically grateful for the gift. His single possession of value that he had retained was

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a battered old pipe, which had been long without tobacco. His happiness was complete when David gave him a filling for the pipe, and he sat for a time in silence, puffing luxuriously with that appreciation which is known only to those long deprived of such solace.

"I guess you saved me from bein' drownded," Morris said at last. "Your feelin's seem to be kind o' mixed. I guess you meant well all the time except for a minute you lost your temper."

"I 'low I was plumb het up," David admitted reluctantly.

"An' I ain't the one to blame you," the soldier declared. "I don't wonder you had it in for me. It was a cussed mean trick, my swipin' that apple from that poor one-legged boy of ours. But I tell you, mister, when a man's starvin' he ain't rightly responsible for the things he does. A man's belly is a mighty sight bigger than his conscience. Why, mister, I just couldn't help swipin' that apple. Was you ever hungry—real hungry, mister?"

David laughed at the patent absurdity of the question.

"Three er four times a day, 's fur back as I can remember." Then his face sobered. "But I cal'late I hain't ever been hungry like ye Yankees there inside the stockade. You-all was so pesky peaked and pinin', it got me a-goin' with them apples plumb reckless. If I hadn't been so wrought up, I wouldn't 'a' been so darned free with another man's apples." He chuckled amusedly over his own discomfiture.

"They wasn't your'n!" Morris cried.

David shook his head and his face lengthened. Then he told the full narrative of his exploit, while Morris listened eagerly, with many ejaculations of astonishment, of admiration, of sympathy.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he vociferated, when the tale was ended. "I certingly did get you into a peck of trouble, and now you're a-heapin' coals of fire on my head, as it were."

"I owe ye somethin'," David replied with a grin, "fer that extry duckin' I give ye in the river."

The two men continued talking together for a time, discussing their future course of action. David, having embarked on the work

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of rescue, was anxious to carry it to a successful conclusion. He felt a personal responsibility for the man whom he had saved from recapture, and the feeling offset his natural antagonism to this enemy from the North, so that he was willing to work in the fugitive's behalf. The fellow's frank confession of fault in stealing the apple meant for the cripple had done much to change the mountaineer's hostile mood to one of friendliness. It was quickly decided that the two should journey together to the coast. The soldier's identity would hardly be penetrated by the few persons they were likely to meet on the voyage, since in David's clothes there was nothing of his outward appearance to betray him. The chief need for caution would be in the matter of speech. He must speak little if at all, lest his Yankee drawl excite suspicion. With their plans thus settled, the men wrapped themselves in their blankets, and, both alike over-wearied, slept soundly until noon of the next day.

Their leisurely traveling down the river was for the most part uneventful. There were no signs of pursuit, and the few persons whom they encountered showed no suspicion,

for David did the talking, and they regarded his taciturn companion with the stubble of red beard as a fellow mountaineer. It was not until they came near to the South Carolina border that adventure befell.

Several miles before the Yadkin River crosses the state line, beyond which it flows peacefully on its way as the Great Pedee to mingle its cloudy waters with the clearer element of the sea, it passes through a narrow defile worn down through the stone of the cliffs by the ceaseless friction of the waters during untold ages. Here, within the canyon, the stream rushes madly in a sharp descent, crowded within lofty walls. The cavernous place echoes with the roaring turbulence of the stream. To-day the huge power of the rapids has been harnessed for the making of electric current to supply cities and towns far and near. But half a century ago, the waters raced in wasteful riot through a region that was a wilderness.

David, who was wholly unfamiliar with this portion of the river, was able nevertheless to calculate his near approach to the rapids by estimating the distance he had traveled from Salisbury.

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He spoke of the rapids to Morris.

"I 'low we're plumb close t' some rough water. I hain't never been this fur before, but, shucks! I ain't worryin'. I cal'late it ain't likely t' be as bad as some rapids I've shot up in the mountains." He regarded the soldier doubtfully. "Be ye a-feared? If so be, I'll set ye ashore when we hear the river begin thunderin'. Ye'll have a mighty hard climb t' the foot o' the rapids, I reckon, but it'll be safer, like's not, even if ye break a leg on the rocks. But I'm thinkin' ye wasn't born t' be drownded." He chuckled reminiscently.

Morris, too, grinned in response.

"I guess I'll stick to the boat," he asserted. "I've been down rapids myself," he added boastfully. "Up home, our Sunday school had an excursion to Ausable Chasm. Fine rapids there, by cricky! Went down in a steamer. It bobbed around something scandalous. The women was all a-squawkin' an' hangin' onto the men. I was close up to a pippin of a girl, but she didn't seem to have her right senses like, and hugged an old mossback with a fat wife, what clean forgot about them rapids in tell-

ing the girl she was a hussy and how to behave.”

It so chanced, as the skiff drifted down the current toward the beginning of the rapids, that the wind, which had been blowing with increasing violence, and veering from the west, now blew straight from the north. The effect of it was to prevent the men in the boat from hearing the earlier sullen muttering of the troubled waters below. They were already within the grasp of the hurrying current before they were aware that the rapids were at hand. Even when they perceived from their increased speed that they were close to the descent, they were quite undisturbed, all unconscious of any grave peril before them. Had it not been for the wind, the mighty din would have warned them, would have bade them beware and investigate ere facing the danger that menaced them. But their ears were stopped. So, without a qualm of apprehension, they sat contentedly in the skiff, which darted forward with the smoothly hastening water at a speed that increased swiftly from moment to moment. Then, of a sudden, the river made a turn. Within the minute they were

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rushing through a sunless space of somber shadows inclosed by massive cliffs which towered, grim and relentless, between them and the outer world.

CHAPTER VII

WITHOUT warning the uproar of the elements crashed on the ears of the two men in the skiff as their frail craft was swept into the rock-bound recess. Yet, at the outset, the clamor that came from the frantic waters further on was the only thing likely to cause alarm.

This first stretch of the rapids gave no visible hint of the dangers lying in wait beyond. The waters, while hurrying ever more swiftly, showed here a smooth surface, unbroken by projecting rocks. The fluid body moved forward calmly and evenly between the straight, parallel stretches of rock that hemmed it in. There was nothing threatening in this movement so far as the eye could detect, though the swift increase in speed was a terrifying thing. But it needed no more than the thunderous din reverberating among the cliffs to proclaim the deadly peril that menaced close at hand. The enormous

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noise at first astounded the two men, then appalled them. They shuddered and shrank back as if in recoil from the hideous uproar. But the skiff bore them on remorselessly. The gaunt, pallid face of the Union soldier showed ghastly gray through the red bristles of beard; David's ruddy cheeks whitened beneath the tan. The escaped prisoner needed not to be told that a desperate, if not fatal adventure confronted him. Here was nothing like the sportive liveliness of Ausable Chasm. This level flight forward toward the tumult of sound was unspeakably dreadful, ominous of destruction lurking only seconds away, just beyond a break in the straight line of the canyon's walls, where now flashed the danger sign of white, far-flung masses of spray. David, too, felt terror's cold grip on his heart. The rapids he had known had been nothing like this.

With the singular lucidity that so often marks the memory in moments of gravest import, he recalled the various accounts he had heard of these rapids near the border. It seemed to him that each single word ever spoken to him concerning them now flashed

through his brain. He realized, too, with a pang of shame for his own conceited heedlessness of youth, that he had only himself to blame for the extremity in which he found himself. He had had warning enough of the trap set by the river here. Only, in the blind pride of his personal prowess, he had wilfully discounted the tales told him concerning these ravening waters. He had only his own folly to accuse for the fatal pass into which he had entered so recklessly. It was a folly for which he might have to pay with his life. He knew from the infernal clamor bursting out of the distance that only a miracle could save any one alive out of such turmoil.

Panic fell on David. He knew fear for the first time in his life. His heart failed him in the opening seconds of that stealthy, sinister volleying speed with the river's current. He saw the terror-stricken face of his companion turned toward him, vaguely outlined against the gloom; he saw the man's mouth moving grotesquely, whether in prayers or curses he could not tell, since the booming clangor from the cliffs stilled all other sound. For that matter, David just

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then had no care for his fellow victim of the river; his sole concern was for himself—the selfish instinct of the creature for its own life, without a thought to spare for aught else in the universe.

The impulse of fear drove David to vain endeavor. He swung the steering oar from its place in the stern, and beat with it frantically in furious swings through the water. He put every ounce of his strength into this assault against a relentless enemy. The effort was futile. The skiff did not even swerve in its flight onward. It was the tragical struggle of a pygmy against a Titan.

Morris was crouching on the bottom of the boat, as if seeking protection behind its frail bulwarks from the river's frightfulness. His eyes were glazed; his lips were writhing in impotent soundlessness. The soldier who had fought undismayed and bravely on many bloody fields, now huddled cowering and gibbering in the grasp of stark despair.

Something of sanity returned to David. Fear still possessed him, but his momentary panic passed. He realized the utter absurdity of any attempt to match his puny strength against the river's might. He

recognized as well the futility of his purpose even could it have been achieved in turning the skiff's course to either side, for the twin walls of stone that confined the stream rose sheer for a long way. There was nowhere any possibility of a landing place, nowhere a projection to which one might cling. Those bleak, slimy, perpendicular surfaces were absolutely unscalable. The mountaineer abandoned further effort. He strove, without much success, to regain some measure of courage and to face the outcome, whatever it might be, in a spirit of manly fortitude. Mechanically he shipped his oar, and sat with countenance grimly set in readiness for whatever might befall. A defiant energy welled up in him. He would not cringe in the presence of the final catastrophe, though he had no least hope of escaping alive out of this evil place.

All this in a matter of seconds. The skiff fairly flew the length of the canyon's level stretch. It came with incredible quickness to the bend where against the outer cliff the pounding waters cast high wreaths of spume. David expected that the boat would be hurled against the rock, would be crushed

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to splinters, leaving them helpless in the race. But the time was not yet. The skiff had been in the very center of the channel, and, though it now swung down within inches of the stern rampart, it did not quite touch. The falling spray came in a drenching shower. In the same instant the boat was swept with the stream in a great curve, and went hurtling along the second stage of the rapids.

Here the din was deafening. But through it pierced a thin thrust of sound—the shrill shriek of the soldier as his affrighted gaze beheld the chaos now revealed. David gave no conscious attention to the man's cry, but somehow it seemed like an echo from his own emotion as he stared aghast at the spectacle of the river in its rage.

It was as if the stream had suddenly gone mad, and wallowed in an insensate fury, yet was subtly aware of its own crazed condition, and sought to flee from this, its torture chamber, out into the distance, where the sane peace of the valley waited with smiling welcome. The rocky floor of the rift through which the river tore fell away in a slope so steep that the torrent seemed rather to leap

than glide. And the course of the stream was roughly meandering. The cliffs, too, were jagged, worn to uncouth shapes by the buffettings of the waves, ridged and furrowed, here with prongs like the tusks of some ferocious monster, avid to rend and devour, there with eroded grottoes, dim and mysterious, within which the baffled waters whispered and moaned. But the chief danger spots were where rocks reared their crests in steadfast resistance to the endless battering of the river. Each protruding point, though itself veiled from view, was made known by white sheen of spray from the water shattering against it. Others, too, there were, which, though without such warning of their presence, were none the less deadly—those that did not quite clear the surface, but lay beneath in ambush to destroy.

The skiff plunged downward with the flood. It rocked perilously under the pounding of opposing currents. The two men were forced to cling with all their strength to the gunwales, to avoid being carried into the river's hungry maw. The instinct of self-preservation made them hold fast with desperate energy to the frail support that alone

lay between them and destruction in the rabid coil of waters. But reason forbade any expectation that their respite could endure for more than a few flitting moments.

The boat reeled under a sudden vicious blow. As it careened, one side scraped against an outthrust of rock. The little craft shuddered at the contact like a living thing, but there was no pause in the onward rush. David gasped in relief as he saw that no injury had been wrought. He wondered dully how long it would be before the coming of the crash that must mean the end of all things. Already the clothes of both men were wringing wet. The skiff was half-filled by fallen spray. The boat veered violently to the left, missing the cliff by a hand's breadth. It was caught in an eddy and spun dizzily for what seemed a long time. In reality it was no more than the fraction of a second. Then again it leaped downward. It fled like a sentient thing, swerving this way and that to dodge the lethal rocks. It came to David's mind that now the chief turmoil was behind them. A flame of hope kindled in him. His eyes roved the canyon before him and he saw that the cliffs were

less towering, more broken. The place was visibly lightening. And there could be no mistake: the bedlam of the river was diminishing. Yes, surely, there could be no mistake: the end of the rapids was at hand. The flame of hope in David's breast blazed high.

The skiff hesitated, quivering like a wounded thing. Its bottom rasped over a toothed surface of hidden stone. A great mass of boiling water drove against it, as it lay wavering, half-capsized. The force of the impact hurled the boat aloft into the air as if it had been a feather. It descended in a long arc and fell full on an immobile, pitiless bulk of rock, which crushed it instantly, smashed it into tiny fragments, which went swirling and dancing away on the tide like thistledown before the gale. The crash of the riven boat filled David's ears. He felt himself locked fast in the embrace of the river, felt himself dragged forward, downward. A pain like fire burned through his brain—and consciousness ceased.

CHAPTER VIII

THE greatest mysteries are not those conceived by the fiction-makers. The mysteries that have to do with things actual are the most fascinating and the most baffling —when there can be no certain solution. Plato, twenty-odd centuries ago, wrote a few words concerning the lost Atlantis. Throughout those ages the learned have sought with all diligence to prove the verity amid a vast jumble of speculations over the fate of a vanished continent. They have searched in vain. To-day, as always, that bit of world history remains enticing, elusive, unknown. There was the Man in the Iron Mask. He is the one utterly unrecognized personage in civilization's record. A great novelist portrayed him, and offered an explanation of his identity. There have been other explanations of that identity, ingenious and excellent every one. The only flaw is that the various theories presented are totally

irreconcilable. As a matter of fact, the mystery of the Man in the Mask remains still pathetic and dreadful—and entrancing. So, too, the mystery of a lost colony; summed in a single word, Croatan—of which word no man knows the source or the significance.

The mystery is none the less absorbing in that it has to do with folk of our own blood, dwelling in our own land.

Sir Walter Raleigh sent no less than three unfruitful expeditions to Roanoke Island, at the junction of Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. This land of Virginia seemed indeed one flowing with milk and honey, and there was every reason to believe that a colony here would flourish exceedingly. The woods were alive with game, the waters teemed with fish, the rocks in the sounds bore oysters in inexhaustible supply, the soil was extraordinarily fertile. The third expedition brought colonists for a permanent settlement. There were men, women and children. Houses were built, clearings were made and crops were planted. There was not a qualm of foreboding on the part of any when the ships set sail for England, to return in a year's time with supplies. It

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was in this colony on Roanoke Island that Virginia Dare was born—first white child born in America.

There came troubrous times in England. The return of the ships was delayed for three years. When at last the little fleet sailed into the island harbor, officers and men alike were amazed. They had expected the colonists to come swarming in welcome of the returning vessels after the long period of isolation from the rest of the world. Instead, not a single person was anywhere visible. The houses of the community stood with closed doors. Investigation only deepened the puzzle presented by the situation. The place was wholly deserted. The houses were carefully searched, but there was no trace of recent occupancy in any of them. It was plain that the dwellings had been deserted, and for a long time. Nowhere was a hint given to tell the story of this strange disappearance. There were no signs of combat, such as might have appeared had the colonists been slaughtered by Indians. There was nothing to suggest that starvation had destroyed the little band. No cluster of rudely marked graves proclaimed an inva-

sion by virulent disease. There was in truth absolutely no clue from which to deduce a reason for the weird thing that had befallen.

No clue—save one.

Near the landing stage a tall pole had been erected. Its conspicuousness gave it significance. A word was carved on it; a single word. That word was:

“Croatan.”

Such is the mystery. None knows the fate of the colony that disappeared so strangely. One may only surmise as to what occurred. And surmise here, in view of all the facts, has small justification in any aspect of the matter. The mystery as to how and whither these men, women and children went forth from their homes may be indicated in that one word, Croatan. But that word itself too, is a mystery—fit symbol, if symbol it be, of the folk who left it.

Centuries afterward, that portion of Virginia which was to become the interior of the two Carolinas began to be settled by hardy and industrious adventurers. Into the tier of counties situated between the Lumber River and the Yadkin, contiguous to the

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South Carolina border, came the advance guard from a body of Scotch pioneers. Finding soil and climate to their liking, they summoned their fellows, and made a permanent settlement.

They found, however, that in and about the section which they had selected they were not, after all, the first comers. Here was already established a flourishing community. The people that constituted it was a strange sort. The race showed an amalgamation that was unique. These individuals were distinctly unlike the neighboring tribes of Red Men, even though they displayed some racial characteristics in common with the Cherokees, whom they most resembled. They spoke the English language; they had English usages; they wore clothes fashioned after English custom; their homes were substantial log houses; they kept droves of ponies and herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. The men displayed good physiques; the women were comely. Perhaps the one thing that most differentiated them from the Indians was the fact that the heaviest labor was performed by the men instead of the women. They had little to tell of a definite

kind as to their origin. The familiar myth declared that they had come from a long way off. There was evidence of an Indian strain in the blood from the cheekbones, which while not extremely prominent were higher than the average among whites. A final peculiarity was found in the nomenclature. Many members of the tribe had English names. And these names were identical with those of the lost colonists!

On the face of it, there are reasons a plenty why the members of this tribe should call themselves the Croatans. Anyhow, their neighbors have given them the name, and they have accepted it. What strange, perhaps horrible, history lies hidden here, we cannot know, we may not guess with any precision. And, since there is no definite evidence to the contrary, we may best take this people at its own estimate as comprising the sole descendants of the colony that abandoned Roanoke Island in a fashion so inexplicable more than three hundred years ago.

In the centuries that elapsed after the mingling of the blood of whites and red men in the Croatans, the tribe passed the years in leisurely, migratory living on the main-

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land. Thus they grew to know all the coastal region. They became familiar with every detail of the Atlantic plain. They were at home on the savannahs that reached levelly toward the sea, and they knew the innumerable secret trails that penetrated the labyrinths of the swamps, where the treacherous ooze steamed beneath canopies of funeral cypress, garlanded with Spanish moss in endless drooping festoons. They fattened their larders with the game to be found among the open forests of yellow pine spread over the coastal plain. They came to intimate acquaintance with the higher ground of the Piedmont plateau, where their rifles took toll of the creatures that harbored on slopes thickly timbered with oak and elm and hickory. They even pressed their hunting up higher into the Brushy Mountains of the Blue Ridge, where hard wood and conifers mingled.

Wherever the Croatans made their camp, they were formerly rather undesirable as neighbors. They were a people apart. All others were by way of being their natural enemies, and, as such, legitimate prey, to be plundered as opportunity served. The chief

pastime of the men was in forays against the peace, property and prosperity of honest settlers who were so unfortunate as to excite the cupidity of the lawless band. The sparsely settled region was powerless to protect itself from such depredations. The strongest force must have failed to track them through the swamps, where they alone could pass safely by quaking bog and slimy morass. Their camp was always adequately prepared to resist attack, and could easily have repelled any siege that might possibly be brought against it.

So the Croatans lived and thrived through the centuries and their consciences were not a whit troubled by their thievery, for indeed they thought no moral wrong of it. They regarded themselves, in a somewhat vague, but very practical way, as overlords of the country round about, with all the rights of suzerainty.

Chief Lowrie built his camp not far from the Yadkin River and close to the border of South Carolina. The outbreak of the Civil War was not of supreme importance to him or to his people. Some of the Croatans were loyal to their Southland; but the fact that

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the nation was in the throes of mortal strife distressed many of them not at all. On the contrary, it caused rejoicing, since the drafting of men to the colors made raiding easier.

On the very day that David and the soldier gave themselves so recklessly to the merciless fury of the rapids, Chief Lowrie summoned to his presence for a very serious conversation his only child, the Princess Elizabeth.

CHAPTER IX

THE princess was in her bedroom, embroidering an intricate design in beads on a moccasin of finest buckskin, when she heard her father's call. She wondered a little at the summons, which had a peremptory ring not usual in his speech to her. She got up obediently, laid aside her work, and went out into the living-room of the cabin where her father awaited her.

This room was a spacious one, running the whole length of the cabin, with two smaller chambers opening from it on either side. The huge fireplace with a kettle of stew simmering from the crane indicated that the kitchen was here, while the rudely fashioned table spread with oilcloth showed that the place served as a dining-room also. Other furnishings proved it to be the family sitting-room. The composite character of the place was revealed in the orderly array of shining copper and iron cooking utensils

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hung upon the walls, in the display of coarse crockery arranged on a set of shelves, in the high desk and smaller table, on which stood a candle before a row of well-worn books.

Chief Lowrie had been oiling his rifle. Now, as his daughter entered the room, he set the weapon against the wall, and from his place in a heavy armchair regarded her gravely, yet with manifest pride and tenderness. And Elizabeth returned his gaze levelly. She stared at him half-curiously, as if she felt somehow that this interview was fraught with a significance beyond the ordinary. It appeared to her that her father was a little strange in his manner, his bearing more authoritative than that to which she was accustomed in his relation to her.

The chief of the Croatans was in truth a striking figure. He was a man of much more than the average height, and the length of his body made him appear so even when sitting. He was broad-shouldered, too, evidently the possessor of an exceptional physique. At fifty, his form had coarsened, so that he had lost something of the elasticity and swiftness of his movements. But the

great strength remained undiminished. It was a strength that had made him able to rule his people by might as well as by the right of inheritance, for there was no man in the tribe to stand against him, nor ever had been. His head and face, too, were those of a natural ruler, massive and powerful. His iron-gray hair, still unthinned by the years, waved a little, and the abundant locks gave dignity. The features were of a Roman type, haughty and rugged, usually a little cruel, a little savage.

But there was nothing either cruel or savage in their expression now as he contemplated his daughter. On the contrary, the sloe-black eyes glowed with affection as they scrutinized the girl from beneath shaggy brows.

The daughter was assuredly one to delight a father's heart. She was taller than most women. Evidently she had inherited a share of her father's physical vigor. She stood straight and pliant, and the unconscious pose revealed an exuberant energy. She had the strength that comes from muscles of steel sheathed in the soft, yet firm flesh of a woman. For she had inherited not only the

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strength of her father, but also the beauty and charm of the mother who had died to give her birth. At eighteen, she had reached full development of her womanly grace. She wore a one-piece homespun gown, which reached just below her knees. A thong of deer-skin belted it at the waist. The homely garb became her well, since it displayed the exquisite lines of a figure gently rounded, slender and lithe. There was a suggestion of the princess in the dainty feet, trimly shod in high moccasins. But the quality of her found its best display in her face, which was not merely striking for its delicate loveliness, but for its intelligence and nobility. In some remarkable manner the slight accentuation of the cheekbones increased the effect, as did the rich bronze tint that underlay the red and white of her complexion. There was firmness in the rather generous mouth, and with it tenderness, perhaps a subtle prophecy of passion. The slightly arched nose gave her the look of a patrician, and it harmonized well with the great black eyes, set wide apart. The brow seemed now a trifle too high for womanly perfection, for the heavy masses of her hair were drawn

away from it and gathered in two heavy braids which fell over the gently swelling bosom to her waist.

She went forward slowly, until she was immediately before her father. There she stood sedately awaiting his pleasure.

After a moment of hesitation, he addressed her. His voice was a little harsh, but not unkind. It indicated that his feelings were stirred more deeply than they usually were, that this was an occasion of peculiar importance, in which she, the daughter whom he loved, was intimately concerned.

"Ye'r' eighteen year old, 'Liz'beth,'" he began. "An' ye'r' a woman grown. An' ye'r' my darter—" he smiled wryly—"the nearest thing t' a son an' heir what I've got. I ain't complainin' edzackly 'cause ye ain't a boy. But, 'cause I ain't got a son t' take my place as chief o' the tribe, why, ye see, 'Liz'beth, hit's up t' ye t' take fer yer man the one what's fitten t' rule the Croatans in my stid, when I'm dead an' gone. Ye understan', don't ye, gal?" He waited for an answer, surveying his daughter with somber eyes.

A trace of trouble showed in the lines

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of the princess' face. She did indeed understand perfectly the significance of her father's words. In a crude way, both the father and daughter felt themselves subject to the principle of *noblesse oblige*. The pride of birth was strong in both of them. Chief Lowrie often boasted to his daughter concerning his high birth. He claimed descent from the chiefs of the red men, and, too, he vaunted a white lineage, which went back to Virginia Dare in this country and to her forebears in the old world. The girl had accepted his vainglorious pretensions without question. She regarded herself as the progeny of a great ancestry, and, as such, hedged in with responsibilities due to her position. She was well aware that since she was the only child of the chieftain, the continuance of the blood must come from her marriage. She had no thought of revolt against her father's decree, which seemed to her inevitable under the circumstances. Rather, she welcomed it as a duty to be done. Nevertheless, now that the crisis approached, she found herself reluctant. She was not without her maidenly dreams. The father, full of an inordinate pride in his beautiful daugh-

ter, had sent her to the seminary at Fayetteville, where she had completed a course that gave her an excellent education. She had been fond of reading. Romances thrilled her. In her reveries, she had fancied herself a princess who awaited the coming of Prince Charming to awaken her soul by the touch of his lips. That imagined Prince Charming was, alas! totally unlike any one of the young men among the Croatans. He was most unlike Goins, the man next in authority to her father, in whom the chief put most reliance. Now, as she nodded assent to her father's question, she waited unhappily to hear this suitor's name pronounced. And it came in the chief's next utterance.

"Ye must take Charlie Goins fer yer husban'. Thar ain't no two ways about hit. 'E's got more gumption than any other feller in the tribe. An' 'e's mighty nigh as strong as I be. 'E'll be able t' keep 'em in order, when I'm done." He cast a eugenic eye over his daughter's form. "Yer children orter be fust class. Charlie ain't no ravin', tearin' beauty t' ketch a gal's eye. I 'low that. But 'e's a man, an' that's the main thing

atter all. We're inbred too damn' much, an' that's the truth. Charlie ain't good enough fer ye, 'Liz'beth; but 'e's the best we've got, an' that settles hit. Ye'r' old enough t' be wed. Charlie's only been waitin' fer my word. I'll give hit t' 'im now. Ye hear?" In the father's voice was the ring of patriarchal authority.

The girl bowed her head in meek assent to the implied command, though she felt an inward shudder of repulsion as the face of the man she was destined to marry rose before her mental vision. An instinctive desire at least to postpone this final bestowal of herself on one whom she detested caused her to speak for the first time since she had entered the room.

"Give me a few days, to prepare myself." She hesitated, and then went on, almost timidly, with a great wistfulness in her tones. "It's a—sort of shock, you know."

"Why, 'Liz'beth, ye ain't s'prised none, be ye?" the father exclaimed.

"No, not surprised, really," the girl admitted. "But now that it's come, it's a shock just the same, even though I was expecting it. I reckon it's just because

that's the way girls are." She smiled placatingly.

The chief grunted scornfully.

"All women's cussed foolishness!" he retorted. Then his manner softened. "But ye always been a good gal, 'Liz'beth, an' thar ain't no sech a'mighty hurry 'bout yer gittin' spliced. The only anxious one, I cal'late, is Charlie, an' 'e kin stand hit fer a few days—leastways 'e'll hev t'."

The princess smiled radiantly, joyous over having achieved her object.

"I'll go for a hunting trip," she announced. "I'll go at once. I don't want to meet Charlie until—afterward. I'll have Minnie meet me, and bring rations."

"All right," came the father's consent, and he nodded dismissal.

The girl's preparations were quickly made. They consisted for the most part in donning a heavier pair of moccasins, in slinging the powder-horn and bullet-pouch over her shoulders, in a hurried summons to Minnie, her most intimate companion, to whom she gave directions to meet her near sundown at the secret hunting lodge with supplies. These things done, Elizabeth, carrying her

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small-bore rifle with its octagonal barrel, mounted her pony, and rode swiftly toward the river, with intent to pass in solitude the few free hours that still remained to her of maidenhood.

CHAPTER X

THE princess followed a trail that led to the westward through the forest. When she reached a point near the river, she left her pony tethered in a thicket, with a feed of meal from a bag which had been hidden in the underbrush. Then she made her way on foot in a southwesterly direction until she came to the eastern bluff of the Yadkin, at a point near the lower end of the rapids. It was here that the hunting lodge was located, the whereabouts of which she had kept jealously guarded as a secret from every one, except her *confidante*, Minnie. Soon after finding the place, the idea of building a shelter there had occurred to her, and with her friend's aid the task had been accomplished. Chief Lowrie alone knew of the existence of the lodge, but even he was ignorant of its precise location. The princess was fond of wandering in the wilderness for days at a time, and on such occasions usually

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returned to the lodge at night, where Minnie would meet her and bear her company.

Now she climbed down from the top of the bluff, following a rough and precipitous path in a rift of the cliff. This brought her to a broad ledge, overhung by the hollowed rock of the higher cliff. Thus was formed a shallow natural cavern, fronting toward the west and open on three sides. At either end was rude matting, made by the girls themselves from woven sedge-grass, supported on poles. Protected as it was from the north and the east winds, the cavern was snug enough for comfort in that mild climate. If the night air came chill, there was always a brisk fire of pine knots burning on the rocky shelf. For the rest, the lodge was equipped with two bunks where blankets were spread over thick layers of pine needles. Deal boards, collected from a pile of drift at a bend in the river below, had been nailed to a section of stump to make the table. Other bits of stump served in lieu of chairs. A few cooking utensils completed the furnishings.

There would still be many hours before sundown and the coming of Minnie. The

princess was grateful for this period of solitude. She felt that she must commune with herself searchingly over the change that was imminent in her life. Her mood was an admixture of melancholy and rebelliousness. She was half-frightened at herself for the bitterness of her antagonism to the project commanded by her duty to her father and to her people.

She laid down the rifle and placed the powder-horn and bullet-pouch with it. Then she seated herself cross-legged on the level stone, and stared up and down over the vast and splendid scene. In her ears was the roaring of the rapids, but softened by distance. Usually, Elizabeth looked long in fascinated wonder at the seething waters in their ceaseless race past her refuge. The power and the strangeness of them never failed to excite in her an admiring awe. And she loved the majestic, yet peaceful panorama that was outspread around about. Always hitherto a kindred serenity had stolen into her soul as she contemplated the tranquil beauty of the valley to the south. To-day, it was more than ever lovely, for field and forest, upland and bottom, were alike

gorgeously colored, yet in most delicate harmony of tints, by the autumn air. The girl's mood, however, was unsympathetic to the gracious charm of nature. Her spirit was in turmoil. Her eyes turned inevitably to the rioting waters in the canyon. She felt within herself a like frantic, though invisible, struggle to escape. The near prospect of union with the man whom her father had selected appalled her. The coarse-featured face of the fellow rose in her memory, and she recoiled from it in loathing. She recalled how once he had tried to kiss her—recalled, too, the nausea his touch had caused. She had sought to evade even his gaze, affronted by its leering attempt at intimacy. She realized that the surrender of herself into this man's keeping would tax her to the utmost of her strength. She had no thought of resistance. Her ideal of conduct demanded this sacrifice of herself. But she understood that she would have need of all her will to go through with the performance of her duty graciously. She thanked God that her father had accorded this interval in which to prepare herself. She would have need of it to the full.

For a long time the girl sat there, brooding over a future that appeared altogether dismal and repellent. She was distraught with apprehensions concerning the life that stretched before her. Her natural intelligence had been broadened by education. She could not doubt that this union with a man whom she so detested would mean unbroken misery. Yet, she had no choice, as it seemed to her, save to accept such sorrow for her lot. Thus only could she fulfill the obligation imposed upon her by birth as daughter of the chief of the Croatans. She sighed gently in a tender sadness of renunciation at thought of the ideal man of her dreams. Him she could never know. She could never thrill to his touch, never bask in the ardor of his glances, never yield herself to him in lovers' raptures. Instead, there would be only and always Goins, bestial and vicious, with the gorilla-like arms to clasp her, with the thick, loose lips to kiss her. She shook in a spasm of anticipatory dread. The tears of a self-pity welled from the limpid eyes, and trickled slowly over the velvet curve of the cheeks. And ever she stared downward at the mad riot of the canyon's waters.

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She saw the skiff as it was swept into the last, most furious stage of the rapids. She uttered an ejaculation of horror as she realized that the tiny craft, reeling and rushing with the raging stream, carried two men. It seemed certain that they were doomed to destruction in the cauldron where rock and water battled so unceasingly against each other, but joined their forces to annihilate any that came between. Her spirit grew faint with fear for the two hapless victims of the river. She watched the craft's wild flight in a trance of terror. It was a recurring miracle second by second that it still remained afloat despite the constant assaults on every side. For a moment she even ventured to hope that, after all, the final miracle might come to pass, that the boat might plunge unscathed into the pool at the rapid's foot, and bear its freight alive out of the jaws of death.

The hope was killed almost in the instant that gave it birth. Aghast, she saw the skiff rise high in air as if driven up by a dynamite charge. She saw it swing forward in the long arc of its fall back to the water. She saw it crash down upon the rock, saw it dis-

integrate before her eyes, saw its occupants in the grip of the river. She saw one man swept by an eddy toward the wall on her side of the canyon. She saw that he was apparently uninjured, for he was swimming in a desperate effort not to be carried away into the resistless grasp of the channel current. She knew that there was a chance of life for him, since the cliffs were much broken at this point, so that, could he attain to the river's edge, he might find a way to safety.

But that other! The girl's heart stood still in dread. It seemed impossible that he could win through. In another moment, a cry of pity broke from her lips. She could not doubt that the man was marked for death. Her eyes caught the white blur of his face as it gleamed for an instant and was gone, engulfed by the torrent. He had made no struggle. It was clear that he had been rendered helpless by some injury, had been left the toy of the merciless stream.

Suddenly, a new thought broke the paralysis of fear that had fallen on Elizabeth. It was the thought of rescue. The possibility was too remote for credence, yet it spurred her to action. She did not pause to consider

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her course. The single means that offered a chance of success flashed on her consciousness. She moved with swiftness and precision, as if carrying out a carefully considered plan. She sprang to her feet, and went hurrying down the cliffs toward the river.

The route she took was one perilous to the careful and plodding climber. It promised to prove fatal to one who fled at such reckless speed, skirting ledges that gave barely foothold, leaping from shelf to shelf where any slip meant death. But anxiety drove the girl ever faster, regardless of the danger. She knew the need of haste—the vital need. She must reach the base of the cliffs before the body of the stricken man was borne past the bend in the river a little way below. The winding of the stream gave her a slight advantage. There was, however, no time for painstaking care in the descent, if she would not be too late. So she darted downward, undeterred by risks that seemed certain destruction. It was only the splendid strength of her and the perfect co-ordination of eye and muscle, and, above all, the brave spirit of her that enabled her to cover the precarious trail unharmed.

At the very end, disaster almost overwhelmed her. When she was a score of yards above the river, whence a rough, steep slope ran to the water, a fragment of rock gave way under her light footfall. She stumbled, lost her footing for an instant, and was thrown from her balance, though she did not fall. Nevertheless, she was compelled to continue on downward at increased speed, powerless to check her headlong career over the sharply slanting litter of broken rocks. She went leaping in great strides, each longer than the one before. At the river's brim, she sprang high, and was carried out clear of the boulders that edged the stream. She fell uninjured in the pool formed here by a backset of the water within the half-encircling arm of rock that was thrust forward from the cliff.

Elizabeth knew the place well. In the air, she had turned bodily to face downstream. While still immersed, she began swimming with every bit of her strength toward the rocky point just below, which bordered that side of the pool. So quick was her effort, and so sturdy, that the avaricious hold of the water was powerless against her. In a

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moment, she had reached the reef, and clambered out upon it, uninjured.

The girl could not pause to think of her own escape. Her sole concern was over the man whom the river had claimed for its own. Was she in time? She advanced to the farthest point of rock lying above the surface. Beyond her the stone showed dimly a little way under water. If the body were swept just here, it would move a little more slowly, being rolled over and over along the rocky shelf. Here, if anywhere, was the solitary opportunity to effect a rescue. But was she in time? Elizabeth straightened and gazed with straining eyes over the tortuous length of pounding waters upstream.

Almost instantly, she glimpsed him.

The face vanished, reappeared yards lower down. Elizabeth knew that the moment had come. It was now, or forever too late. The one poor chance for this stranger's life was in her hands. She nerved herself for the ordeal. The body would be floundering past her in another instant. She half-crouched, tense, expectant, a-quiver with eagerness.

The body was swept into view. It came tumbling—as she had known it would—

through the shallows over the rocky shelf. It was there before her now, ready to her grasp. Her heart jumped, then missed a beat. The body would pass just beyond her reach.

She did not hesitate in the least, but stepped into the race of smooth water that slid over the submerged rock.

The slithering quiet of the surface masked a treacherous fierceness below. The current clamped like a vice on her leg and pulled her down. But, as she fell, her left hand lunged forward—caught a grip in the man's long hair, and held. Her other hand, when she struck the water, quested wildly for a hold on the slimy stone. She was swept along a short distance, then her fingers found their opportunity in a tiny rift. The fingers clutched convulsively. She held herself against the savage dragging of the stream. She was able to lift her head above the water, and to take a long breath. She rested a moment to prepare for the final contest. The beating of the current against the man's inert form wrenched the arm that held him, so that the pain of it was almost intolerable. The strain on the other arm was

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steadier, but the anguish from it was even greater. It seemed to her that she had no strength left for any slightest movement. Nevertheless, she meant to try still further, to the utmost, for her life and for his—if it yet remained in him.

Presently, she bestirred herself to action. Very cautiously, she moved one foot over the slippery stone. The toes within the flexible moccasins sought a fissure or a projection to which to cling. And, very soon, a cleft place offered a safe foothold. Then, the search was continued with the other foot—successfully, at last. Still moving with the utmost care, she got to her knees. The pull of the current on the body was such that she could not flex the muscles of the arm that held it, and her suffering from the strain was almost more than she could bear, but she set her teeth, and endured it. The tax on the other arm was relaxed, since the feet had come to its support. This partial relief comforted her, and cheered her to renewed endeavor. She secured a safer hand-hold. So, with tedious slowness, in physical torment from the buffeting of the current against her and against the burden she bore,

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Elizabeth crawled to the bank. There, in a last frenzied output of waning strength, she hauled the body of the man after her, clear of the river's clutch. She did not know whether he was alive or dead. For the moment, she hardly cared. Beside the twisted, sodden figure of the man, she sprawled in collapse, now that the ordeal was ended, and lay in a stupor of fatigue.

CHAPTER XI

THE princess moved slightly and moaned like a hurt child. She remembered dully the man she had seen in the rapids, her run down the cliffs, her fight against the voracious river. It all seemed to have happened ages and ages ago, in some other strange lifetime. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, her consciousness cleared. She recollect ed every detail distinctly. She sat erect with quick energy, though the motion of her stiffened muscles was torture. She looked down at the still form by her side. Was he dead? Had her fierce struggle in his behalf been all in vain?

She stoically disregarded her own physical misery, and set herself to complete the work she had begun—if indeed it were not already too late. She bent over the body, and thrust her hand within the bosom. To her joy, she detected a beating of the heart, feeble and broken, but unmistakable none the less. New

strength flowed into her from this encouragement, and she entered on the task of restoration with hopeful vigor. She turned the man on his face, with his head down the slope, in order to clear his lungs of the water he had swallowed. Then she turned him back, and seized his arms and worked them to stimulate the breathing. She disregarded the cut on his head, which had doubtless stunned him. The immersion in the stream had kept it open, but now the blood was clotting and only a little flowed sluggishly from the gash. The wound must await its turn. Death from drowning was the vital peril.

There came a choking gasp from the unconscious man; his body was racked by a convulsive shudder. The girl hastily pulled him about, so that his head was on the higher ground. This done, she stood erect, and looked down into his face. She was thrilled to see that the eyes were open and gazing dazedly up at her. In the same second, the lids fell, and remained fast shut. Elizabeth bent close and watched, and saw the rise and fall of the chest in the rhythm of breathing. Triumph filled her. She alone had fought

for this man, and she had brought him alive back from the very gates of death.

"Hi, there!"

Elizabeth looked up in astonishment, as there fell on her ears this hail in a high nasal voice. She saw on a ledge some rods above her a man in garments which, though they clung to him dripping wet, were plainly several sizes too large for the emaciated frame. The face, too, was gaunt, but its thinness was half-concealed by a short growth of stiff red whiskers. The hatless head showed a thatch of like ruddy color, made sleek for the moment by water. The girl knew that this must be the other occupant of the boat. The fact was confirmed in the fellow's next words.

"You've got him!" There was great excitement in his tone. "Is he alive?"

The princess nodded.

"Come on down and help," she commanded.

She studied the man curiously as he hurried down the descent toward her. While he was yet some distance from her, she spoke with a singularly impersonal note of disdain.

"You're a damn' Yank'." She was quite

unaware that she used the profane adjective, so familiar had it become on the lips of those about her. "Is he one?" Her glance went to the face of the unconscious youth lying beside her.

Morris shook his head in violent dissent.

"He's a Johnny Reb, all right," he declared. "He saved me from the river when the bloodhounds was after me, and so he sort of had me on his hands. But there's more to it than that," he added, as he came to a halt by the girl. "It's a long story."

"No time for it now," Elizabeth stated, with cold authority. "We've got to get him up the cliffs in a hurry, where he can be dry and warm."

Morris cast a doubtful eye up the way along which he had just come.

"That Salisbury prison kinder took the tuck out of me," he admitted. "I'm too darn' puny for any use."

"I 'low you can help some," was the answer. "Cut two birch poles about eight foot long."

"Hain't got any knife," Morris objected. "They didn't leave us anything there in the stockade."

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Elizabeth bent over the form of the man she had rescued, and searched the pockets. She uttered an ejaculation of satisfaction as she drew out a big clasp-knife.

"There!" she exclaimed, and tossed it to the Union soldier, who caught it and straightway set about the task she had imposed.

When, after a little, he returned with the required lengths of sapling, the girl was in readiness with David's coat, which she had removed, and some strips of worn canvas, which she had brought from the heap of drift at the edge of the inset. With Morris' aid, she buttoned the coat over the two poles, and, to make it more secure, cut slits in it, and laced the two sides firmly together with the latches from her moccasins. The pieces of canvas were bound on, to increase the length of the supporting part in this improvised litter. She added also the belt from her waist at a point where it would support the body at the knees. To complete the work to her satisfaction, she removed the mountaineer's suspenders, and made a mesh of them for a head-rest.

"Now help me lift him," came the curt order. She herself took the body under the

arms, and carried most of the weight, as they raised it and placed it on the narrow litter.

"I'll take the foot," she explained. "It will be heavier going up, and I'm stronger than you. Go on down the bank a little way. You'll see a path up that's easier."

Morris seized the poles, and went forward obediently. With the girl's voice guiding him, he duly turned into the trail that led upward. It was an arduous ascent. It taxed the strength of the girl on whom most of the burden rested. It was almost too much for the debilitated fugitive, whose weakness had been increased greatly by the experiences of the day. But, with many rests on the way, the work was at last achieved, and the summit of the bluff attained. Afterward, it was a simple matter to carry the litter along the comparatively level top, to the point above the hunting lodge, and thus down the short descent to the cavern itself. As they came to the place, Morris cried out in surprise, and uttered numerous questions, to which the girl gave absolutely no heed.

"Help me get him into this bunk," she ordered the wondering soldier. When this

had been accomplished, she brought a flask of peach brandy from the stores in the lodge, and with some difficulty managed to make David swallow a little. "Now you get his clothes off, and rub him dry, and wrap him up well in the blanket." She dropped a towel on the bunk, and turned away. "I'll get some water to bathe his wound," she added. She took up a tin pail and went out.

When Morris had done, he issued from the cavern, and found her waiting for him. She gave him instructions for building a fire of pine knots at the entrance, and then went within. She bathed the injured man's head with the cold water from the spring, and bandaged it neatly. Afterward, she gave him more of the brandy, which he now took readily, whereat the girl sighed in relief.

Morris came and stood looking down at David with an expression of deep solicitude on his homely face.

"Oughter have a doctor," he remarked gloomily.

But Elizabeth moved her head in negation that seemed strangely emphatic. As a matter of fact, she already felt a proprietary interest in this bit of flotsam which she had

plucked from the river, and she meant to make the saving of him her own exclusive work. She resented the soldier's suggestion from an instinct of jealousy lest any other should interfere between her and the completion of her work.

"This cut on his head isn't very bad," she said; and her voice was a little sharp. "I've cleaned it and done it up. Pretty soon I'll have some salve to put on it." She glanced toward the westering sun, which was now close to the horizon, and knew that Minnie would speedily be at her service to send for the supplies needed in the sick man's behalf. She turned her eyes to David, and noted the slight dew of sweat on his forehead. "No," she concluded decisively, "he won't have any chill now, and that's what I was most afraid of. No, he won't need any doctor. We'll nurse him between us."

Morris, more than ever bewildered, choked back the questions that crowded to his lips. There was much concerning which he would have liked to ask, but somehow the manner of this extraordinary girl, so beautiful, so dominant, and so efficient, halted the expression of his inquisitiveness. Without ventur-

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ing any further remark, he went out of the cavern, and squatted on the far side of the fire, close by the flames, to dry his clothes, and incidentally to ponder in great perplexity the remarkable situation with which he found himself confronted.

It was perhaps half an hour later, and the cavern was beginning to fill with the shadows of dusk, when at last David stirred feebly. His eyelids unclosed, and he gazed up dreamily into the face bending over so near to his own. There was only a lazy contentment in his regard at first. But, presently, this vanished. The eyes narrowed a little and grew brighter. Amazement glowed in them. His lips moved, but the words were inaudible. The girl put her ear close to his mouth, and listened, and heard the whisper:

“Who are you?”

CHAPTER XII

THE answering voice came in a music that was inexpressibly soothing to the lad who listened. The sound of it charmed his spirit, though the words so softly spoken scarcely penetrated his consciousness.

"I am Elizabeth, the daughter of Chief Lowrie, of the Croatans."

"How did I git here? Where is this place, anyhow?" David demanded. He was anxious to know something concerning his surroundings and the events that had brought him hither; but he was more anxious to hear again the melodious cadences of that voice.

"You were in our country—you and your companion—when you were wrecked in the rapids. We brought you here as the nearest place."

David's eyes left the girl's face for the first time. He looked about the chamber inquiringly.

"We?" he questioned.

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"The man who was with you helped me to bring you up here," she responded. "The Yankee soldier from the prison," she added, answering the young man's puzzled glance.

David's face cleared.

"Oh, Morris!" he exclaimed. Full memory rushed back on him. He remembered that last instant of consciousness, when the waters had closed over him, and there had come the stabbing pain through his head. "Morris escaped then?"

"Yes."

"Somethin' must have hit me on the head," David murmured, more to himself than to the girl.

But she heard and answered him.

"Your head was cut on a rock. I have bound it up. It will be sore, but it's nothing very serious."

David put his hand to his head and touched the bandage gingerly, wincing as he did so.

"I 'low ye've been plumb kind t' me, Miss Elizabeth." He smiled in warm gratitude, which was not the less because of the radiant loveliness of the face into which he looked. He experienced a thrill of pleasure in this intimate association with a woman unlike

any he had ever known. She bore herself with a dignity that was unfamiliar in his experience, but had in it something singularly attractive. In this case, the effect was softened by the beauty of her face and by the gentle kindness of her manner toward him. He felt himself in the presence of a being superior to any he had ever known before. Yet, she was in no wise repellent or aloof. Rather, she displayed toward him an amiability at once maternal and tender. The fact that she had wrought the rescue of this man aroused in her of itself a profound interest, and this interest she unconsciously revealed. Its effect on the object of it was immediate and pervasive. Though he did not as yet know that he was indebted to the girl for his life, he already felt drawn to her with an emotional intensity that was startling, yet delightful. Under her direction, he drank again of the brandy, and soon was able to speak aloud, though weakly.

Morris, from his place outside beyond the fire, heard the two voices, and came hurrying into the cavern, which was now lighted only by the flames.

"Hurrah!" he cried, as he came up to the

bunk. He got hold of one of David's limp hands, and shook it heartily. "Feelin' fit as a fiddle—I don't think!" he exclaimed, with a chuckle. "You gotter thank this girl here that you can feel anything at all. How she ever did haul you out of them rapids I don't know. I hain't hearn the story yet, and I wasn't there to see. But I do know for myself that she's mighty spry, and pow-erful as a man."

David regarded the girl with new wonder and respect, and, too, with a sense of vital relationship.

"You—you-all pulled me out?" he ques-tioned, half-timidly.

Elizabeth showed no embarrassment. She had done the thing, and it was not to be de-nied or belittled. The honesty of her char-acter caused her to speak frankly.

"I saw you upset. I was up here. There was just a chance. I took it. I got down to the point below in time to catch you. It was close work. I thought once I couldn't do it. But it came out all right."

David looked into the limpid brown eyes of the girl with a reverent admiration.

"Ye put yerself in danger t' save me!" he

said softly. There was such a tone of feeling in his voice that for the first time Elizabeth was a little confused. But she answered as candidly as before.

"Yes. There was no other way." She assumed an air of brisk command. "And now you must rest." She turned toward Morris. "You go," she bade him. Then she spoke again to her patient. "You must sleep. I'll watch by you. Go to sleep." Almost instantly, David obeyed.

It was a half-hour later when a sound of voices from outside attracted the attention of Elizabeth. A glance at her patient showed that he was sleeping soundly. She got up quietly, and went out to investigate. Within the circle of light from the flames, the Union soldier was standing with his arms stiffly stretched above his head and an expression in which surprise, chagrin and fear were blended on his uncomely features. As Elizabeth appeared on the scene, a high feminine voice came incisively from out the night's shadows.

"Now turn yer back, an' keep yer han's up!" The last words were spoken with menacing emphasis.

Morris, as he turned, saw Elizabeth, and his face lighted in relief. He called out whiningly.

"Say, miss, can't you call off this durned she wildcat? She's drawed a gun on me, and stuck me up, and if she ain't just plain crazy, I miss my guess. She's been ravin' about some princess, and accusin' me of havin' her tucked away in a pocket somewhere."

"You can put down your hands," Elizabeth vouchsafed, and as Morris complied with a grunt of satisfaction, she called in a louder tone: "It's all right, Minnie. You needn't be worried any about this man." Unconsciously, she spoke with a contemptuous inflection, under which the fugitive writhed. There and then was born in his heart a feeling of enmity against the girl who was herself so strong and competent, and who regarded him in his weakness so scornfully.

Minnie stepped within the lighted space by the fire. She was a pretty girl, much smaller than the princess, of a more markedly Indian type, very vivacious and intelligent. Under her arm was the rifle which she had

held trained on Morris. Her explanation was to the point.

"I saw this man an' hailed him. I knew he was a damn' Yank' soon's he spoke. I asked him whar you-all was, an' he said he didn't know anything 'bout ye. So I stuck him up."

Morris broke in indignantly.

"She never said a blamed word about you, miss—just some highfalutin josh about a princess. Ain't the little spitfire crazy as a loon?"

The answer came with a serene dignity that left the New Englander utterly flabbergasted.

"I am the Princess Elizabeth."

Having thus said, the girl ignored Morris, and spoke briefly to her friend. She explained what had occurred, and sent Minnie to bring the additional supplies required for the injured man.

While awaiting her messenger's return, Elizabeth reentered the cavern, and took her place beside the sleeping man. It was only after considerable hesitation that Morris ventured to approach her. He was in a state of almost ludicrous bewilderment. He could

by no means solve the puzzle of this girl, who was at once so beautiful and so capable, who spoke with a propriety that even his unaccustomed ears appreciated to some extent, who was called a princess, and herself claimed the rank. He recognized his own inferiority to her, and he knew that she, too, recognized it. The fact filled him with bitterness, which was the more humiliating because he was now dependent upon her bounty for food and shelter and protection in this country of his enemies. A princess who lived in a cave! He was baffled by the mystery of it all, and exasperated by his own helplessness. It was his hunger that compelled him to address her.

Elizabeth frowned at his approach, and lifted a warning finger, lest he disturb the sleeper. So Morris came on tiptoe, and in a whisper asked for something to eat. The girl pointed toward the shelves stocked with provisions.

"Help yourself," she said indifferently.

The man made a full meal, but it was unflavored by gratitude.

When Minnie returned, the two girls rigged a blanket across a corner of the

cavern to form a private chamber. Then, as a little fever set in, and David became restless, Elizabeth redressed the wound with a healing ointment, and afterward soothed him with repeated applications of the cold spring water on his head. Morris was given the second bunk, and Minnie slept on blankets in the curtained corner. But Elizabeth, despite the strain to which she had been subjected in the day's adventure, watched over David in wakeful solicitude through all the long hours of the night. It was not until after dawn, when Minnie had arisen, that she shared the meal prepared by her friend, and then took a few hours for her own repose.

When she reappeared, Elizabeth found David just waking from a refreshing sleep. Only a slight trace of the fever remained.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"As a b'ar!" he declared promptly. His voice showed how greatly he had improved.

Though David protested that he was no longer an invalid, Elizabeth regulated his diet with scrupulous nicety. She was indeed over-careful throughout the days that followed, even absurdly solicitous for the health of this man whom she regarded as her own

personal responsibility since she had saved him from the river. She early admitted the truth that this stranger whom fate had brought filled all the requirements of her ideal mate. It almost seemed to her that her heart had gone out to him at the first instant of seeing his face. She accepted the fact of her love for him, and rejoiced in it. It never occurred to her to doubt that her love would be returned. Though her charge spoke no word of direct tenderness, his eyes were eloquent, and his tones were vibrant with a feeling that found its response in her breast. Morris, always ill at ease in the presence of the princess, spent most of his time smoking on the ledge before the cavern. Minnie was absent a great part of the time. In consequence, Elizabeth and David were for the most part alone together, and inevitably the intimacy between them developed by leaps and bounds. The young man was in the throes of a great passion, though he refused to confess the truth to himself. The duty of loyalty to Ruth sealed his lips to any word of love. But duty was powerless to stem the emotion that surged within him. He denied his heart for very shame,

but he knew the denial was a lie. And, too, often shame vanished, and in its stead was exultation over the loveliness and the worth of this wonder-woman who ministered to him. From hour to hour, from day to day, he lived in a glamour. He dared not face the future; he turned away resolutely from the past. But in the present he was divinely blest.

It was on the sixth day after the rescue of David from the rapids that Elizabeth called Morris to her, and gave him an order.

"Take my rifle, and go out and get some fox squirrels."

The girl's cool tone was disdainful as always when she addressed this enemy from the North.

The soldier took the weapon, and went obediently; but within him the smoldering hostility threatened to burst into a blaze.

CHAPTER XIII

CHIEF LOWRIE and his lieutenant, Goins, were riding through the forest some half-dozen miles to the northwest of the Croatan camp, on their return from a scouting expedition, which had in prospect a raid for plunder. The sharp report of a rifle sounded near, and caused the two men to regard each other in surprise, since none of the tribe was likely to be in this neighborhood. But, in another moment, a thought came to the chief, which caused him to urge his pony in the direction of the sound. There was something familiar in the note of the weapon, and he recalled the fact that his daughter was still isolated somewhere in this vicinity. It seemed to him probable that it was she who had fired the shot. He was anxious for her return home. So, now, he pressed forward in the hope of meeting her and making known his wish. Goins followed his leader, mildly curious as to who the hunter might be.

As the two horsemen rode into a little glade within the wood, they saw a man standing with rifle grounded, who was an utter stranger. The fellow faced the newcomers with an attempt at bravado, which was visibly denied by the involuntary shrinking of his body. The whole effect of the stranger in his ill-fitting garments and with his gaunt face half-hidden by the short red beard, was such as to provoke suspicion. There was something outlandish about him, something that declared he did not belong in the region, even before he opened his mouth. For a few seconds, the Croatans scrutinized the hunter with sharp glances. Then, suddenly, the chief's brows drew down in a black frown. His heavy voice boomed out, strident and menacing. At the first sound of it, the stranger recoiled a pace as if from a blow.

"Whar did ye git thet-thar rifle?" Lowrie demanded. His eyes glowered savagely. Then, as the other hesitated, confused by the fierceness of the unexpected query, the chief continued even more harshly in direct accusation.

"Thet-thar rifle's my darter's. Whar'd

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ye git hit? Speak up damn' quick, if ye wanter save yer wuthless hide."

The unhappy Morris, for the hunter was he, was momentarily stricken speechless by the verbal onslaught. He stood in dumb consternation, his pale, red-rimmed eyes dilated in fear, his jaw sagging. The chief leaped from his saddle with an agility astonishing in one of his bulk. He strode close to the soldier, and towered over him threateningly.

"Whar's my gal, ye whelp?" he demanded furiously. "Find yer tongue, er I'll find hit fer ye."

The fear that had held Morris speechless now drove him to utterance. He babbled quaveringly, brokenly.

"The girl give it to me herself—the girl that says she's a princess—she sent me to shoot squirrels—I hain't stole the gun—I hain't done nothin' at all, mister—"

The stammering whine broke off, for the huge hand of the chief fell on his shoulder, and he was shaken like a rat in the jaws of a terrier. When Lowrie let go his hold, Morris staggered and fell, and then sat cringing abjectly while his assailant spoke again.

"Ye'r' a poor liar, ye damn' Yank'. My

darter ain't runnin' the country with sich as you-all scum out o' Salisbury. Ye don't need t' more'n open yer yawp t' tell whar ye come from. An' ye'll be back thar sudden, if I don't kill ye fust." His voice, which had lightened a little, burst in a mighty roar.

"Whar's my darter?"

Morris scrambled to his feet, and remained half-crouched in terror, ready for instant flight if an opportunity came. But, as the chief stood waiting for an answer, the soldier's brain cleared a little. He guessed that the strange girl who had given him the rifle was in fact the daughter of this raging giant who threatened to destroy him. To his memory came the father's indignant reference to the girl's associating with such as he. It occurred to him that the man would be equally outraged should he become aware of the fact that she was nursing another stranger, with whom she dwelt in a lonely retreat. The enmity that he felt toward Elizabeth moved him to betrayal of her to her father. He was sure that in this wise he could divert wrath from himself to her, and thus perhaps save himself while injuring her. He was still greatly alarmed, but the

hope of escape and of satisfying his hostility toward the princess gave him strength to speak boldly for the first time.

"I can lead you to where your girl is, and she'll tell you she give me her gun herself, to go shootin' with. She's in a kind of cave with a young chap she's fished out of the river."

Lowrie, who had listened with a fair degree of patience, shouted a curse, and Morris shuddered again at the venom in the raucous voice.

"Ye lyin' houn'! I'll cut out thet dirty tongue o' yer'n."

Yet, some subtle note in the man's voice conveyed a hint of doubtfulness, which gave the soldier courage.

"Time enough for that," he retorted, "when I've led you to the place, and you've found out what I've said wa'n't true. Mebbe you know where the cave is."

The chief shook his head.

"I knew she had a place some'res," he admitted, with manifest reluctance, "but I don't know whar hit's at. I 'low you-all kin lead me thar. An' when I've proved ye'r' lyin', I'll tend t' ye 'cordin' t' yer de-

serts, an' it won't be no ways pleasant fer ye nuther."

He reached out, and took the rifle from Morris, who made no effort to retain it. Then he climbed back on his horse, and spoke gruffly to Goins, who throughout the scene had remained a silent, but profoundly interested observer.

"You-all git along t' the camp, Charlie," he ordered. "I'll look arter this-hyar critter myself."

Goins knew the chief too well to attempt any argument against the decree, but turned his horse, and rode away in the direction of the Croatan encampment. As he disappeared from view in the wood, Lowrie spoke a word of command to the soldier, and the two moved away briskly together in a southerly direction toward the rapids of the Yadkin. Each was busy with thoughts not to be shared by any one, least of all by the other, so they covered the miles in silence.

And even more silently a third man followed their trail. Goins, aflame with jealousy over the soldier's report concerning the woman he expected to marry, had tethered his horse when safely out of sight, and then

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had returned to stalk the others, and so to be guided to this cave of which he had never before heard, where Elizabeth companied shamelessly with a foreigner.

Lowrie left his horse at Morris' suggestion when they neared the hunting lodge, and the two men proceeded on foot, moving as noiselessly as possible by tacit agreement. The soldier led the way down the precipitous path to the broad ledge from which the cavern extended. There was no one visible on the shelf to give warning of their approach, but a low murmur of voices sounded from within, made indistinct by the matting that intervened. Morris tiptoed softly to a point in the woven wall where he had discovered a little opening in the sedge-grass. He beckoned to the chief, who had halted, somewhat at a loss, and Lowrie cautiously advanced until he stood by the other's side. After a glance within, the Yankee drew back, and indicated the aperture. The father put his eye to the rent, and looked within. For a few seconds, his gaze, accustomed to the clear outer light, could distinguish nothing plainly within the dim interior of the shelter. But presently his vision adjusted itself to

the obscurity, and he was able to see with a distinctness that caused him to choke back with difficulty the imprecations leaping to his lips.

His daughter was seated on the floor, reclining in a posture of graceful ease against the rough wooden side of a bunk. Her face was all animation, and she was speaking earnestly, in a soft, hurried voice. Her brilliant black eyes were fixed on her listener with an expression of devotion that was unmistakable. That listener answered the confession in her glances with a like emotion in his own. But he did not speak; only nodded mute acquiescence to her words. At the moment when the father thus spied upon her, Elizabeth was saying:

“It has always seemed my duty to marry him.” Even in that dusky light, the chief could detect the flush that mantled his daughter’s cheek. “But now, lately, I have come to know that I can never marry Charlie Goins.”

CHAPTER XIV

LOWRIE withdrew his gaze from the opening in the matting, and noiselessly went back along the path up the bluff for a little way, beckoning the soldier to follow him. When they were at a distance so that he could speak without being overheard, he gave a gruff command to Morris.

"I'll go back thar, an' you-all go 'long inter the cave, an' talk t' my darter. I'll know by the way she acts whether ye been lyin' er not. If ye've tol' the truth, I hain't a-goin' t' hurt ye none." He turned and went cautiously back to the spying place, and an imperative gesture directed Morris toward the entrance of the cavern.

The soldier went forward readily enough, but doubtfully, for he was more than ever bewildered by the course of events. He had expected to see this fierce old man convulsed by rage over the discovery of his daughter's secret association with the stranger. To

his amazement, the man showed no signs of anger, not even of a natural indignation on account of the treachery practised against him by his own child. Instead, the rugged features seemed somehow curiously softened. There was the suggestion of an immense satisfaction in his expression. Morris felt once again that he was utterly at a loss to understand the situation into which he had been thrust. He was well content, however, despite his confusion of mind, since the man who had threatened him now seemed comparatively well disposed and tractable. So he entered the cavern confidently, and displayed the two fox squirrels, which he had carried in his pocket. Elizabeth curtly bade him clean them against Minnie's coming, and nodded dismissal. On his return outside, Lowrie with a wave of the hand indicated that he should ascend to the top of the bluff. But the chief himself chose to remain at his espial a little longer. Thus it came about that he heard himself mentioned by the girl.

"I'm worried about pappy. It will hurt him when he knows that I must go against his wishes. He's always expected me to marry Charlie Goins." Elizabeth's voice

was half-apologetic. "You see, he's father's lieutenant, and so he'd naturally be the next chief if he married me. But I can't marry him, and that's all there is about it. I thought I could, but I can't." Her voice had hardened a little, with a note of defiance in it. "What's more," she added resolutely, "I'm going to tell pappy all about it this very night—and about you, too, David," she added impulsively. She seemed unaware of the implication in her words by this association of her refusal to marry Goins with the fact of the young man's coming into her life.

But the implication was not lost on either of her hearers. In that moment, it was as if a light flamed in David's heart so that the truth stood out naked and unashamed, and beautiful—the truth that this girl, so capable and self-reliant, yet so delicately lovely, so adorably feminine, that this girl, to whom he owed his life, loved him. It flashed on him that he should pay this debt to her with his own heart. But the sense of another duty pressed hard upon him. He felt in every atom of his being the instinct of response to the love which the girl so innocently betrayed. It took the utmost strength of his

will to resist the surge of passion that would have swept him toward her. But he remembered Ruth, and the spirit of loyalty held him motionless and mute, sternly unyielding to his desire. Nevertheless, he could not veil the fires burning in his eyes as they met those of Elizabeth. The girl's gaze fell in a maidenly confusion, half-troubled, wholly sweet, as for the first time, under the impact of that ardent regard, she felt the stirrings of womanly passion within her own breast.

The other listener, the father, who might have been expected to be greatly disturbed by the overthrow of his most cherished plans, showed a surprising indifference to the disappointment. His face was not distorted by either anger or grief over the shattering of his hopes. On the contrary, his heavy features were relaxed into a grin that seemed one almost of approbation. He turned away and very quietly mounted the path that led to the summit, where he found Morris waiting. He gave the fellow his daughter's rifle, which he had retained up to this time, and spoke roughly.

"Ye kin git back thar. I 'low ye was

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tellin' the truth. I hain't got no likin' fer pizen critters sich as ye be. I meant t' put ye back in the prison thar at Salisbury, an' git the bounty fer ye, if I didn't kill ye fust. But my darter's tuck 'up with ye, an' that saves yer hide. But I reckon ye needn't say anythin' t' my darter 'bout hevin' seen an' talked with me. Thet's my business, an' not her'n. Keep yer mouth shet, er hit'll be the wuss fer ye."

As he ceased speaking, the chief hurried off toward where he had left his horse. Morris stood staring after the man, more perplexed than ever, for he had vaguely sensed a geniality about Lowrie, which was contrary to all his expectations. There was an air of satisfaction pervading the chief which was not dispelled in the least by the harshness of his speech. The soldier shook his head despondently as he watched the brawny form disappear within the wood. The mystery of it all was beyond his solving.

There was another who watched the chief. Hardly had Lowrie vanished within the shadows of the forest when Goins left the place in which he had been lying concealed behind some bushes a few rods further up

the bluff. He hurried in his turn to his horse, which he had left at some distance in order to escape observation. He mounted and rode at full speed for the encampment. But he was at pains to take a somewhat roundabout route to avoid being seen by Lowrie. He was sure that the chief would ride slowly, and thus give him ample time to reach the settlement before the other's arrival, even though he took a longer trail. And in this he was justified. When Lowrie dismounted at his cabin door, he was greeted by his lieutenant, who lounged there, smoking. It never occurred to him to suspect that the man whom he trusted had come into the encampment only a few minutes before him, and not an hour agone. But it did occur to him to scrutinize Goins' face with unaccustomed keenness. He saw with new clearness the bestiality of the fellow's countenance, and for the first time he experienced a lively distaste for the one whom he had regarded hitherto as inevitably his successor in the government of the tribe. He became remotely aware, too, of the aversion which such a man as this must provoke in such a woman as his daughter. He perceived with an ab-

rupt sense of self-disgust the monstrousness of the marriage which he had projected between Elizabeth, a girl of purest life and highest ideals, and this creature, so repulsive and so debased. He wondered at the blindness that had permitted him even to consider a union so grotesquely incongruous. He felt a sudden exaltation as he recalled his daughter's decision spoken to David in the cavern, that she would not wed Charlie Goins. The grin that had so mystified Morris a little while before, now reappeared on the chief's face as he considered his lieutenant—a grin equally snug and crafty. Goins, in his turn, was perplexed to know what might lie back of Lowrie's expression. But he was wise enough to bide his time and to ask no question. He guessed that affairs in connection with his wooing were not progressing as he could wish. A rabid jealousy had been aroused in him already by what he had heard from the soldier and the practical verification of it which he had witnessed from his place of hiding on the occasion of Lowrie's visit to the hunting lodge. He swore a silent oath of hatred against the man whom Elizabeth had rescued from the river, and re-

solved to remove that obstacle from his path ruthlessly, should the need arise.

True to her avowed purpose, the princess returned to the encampment that evening with Minnie, and at once sought a private interview with her father. She narrated first, very briefly, the events connected with the coming of David. Her father listened closely, smoking steadily, his face quite expressionless under the anxious eyes of his daughter. When, finally, she paused for some comment, he spoke in a tone of seeming indifference.

"'E needs a little more rest afore goin' on 'is way, ye say? Wall, I cal'late we'll hev to hev 'im hyar till 'e gits right peart ag'in. I 'low 'e kin stop by right hyar, 'e bein', 'cordin' t' yer say-so, a fitten pusson. I'll find a place fer the sojer some'res till we kin git rid o' 'im."

A dainty blush of pleasure warmed the girl's cheeks as her father thus gratified the wish which she had not directly expressed. The chief was not unobservant of the effect upon her, and his complacency increased, although his features remained as stolid as ever.

The princess, encouraged by her success

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thus far, took heart of grace, and broached the subject of the proposed marriage between her and Charlie Goins. She was in some degree abashed by her own temerity in going counter to her father's wish, but she was upheld by a spirit of determination born of the new emotion that had come into her heart. The feeling for David was not to be denied, and the first effect of it was to forbid her from entering into a loveless union with a man whom she despised and loathed. So, with much faltering, she made known the fact of her insurmountable antipathy for the man selected by her father, and her final resolve to resist the fellow's suit, even to the point of direct disobedience to her father's command. The girl spoke humbly, but there was an under-note of deliberate decision, which her father recognized and respected, though he still maintained his austere demeanor. Elizabeth was distressed by the sternness of his visage, and added a pitiful plea for forgiveness of her fault, if such it seemed to him. Then, at last, she ceased speaking, and for a little time silence rested between the two.

When presently he answered, the chief's

voice was grave, but with a kindness in it that the girl had not expected.

"I 'low ye'r' honest, 'Liz'beth. Now I jist want ye t' tell yer ol' pappy one thing right out fr'm yer heart, gal. Ye didn't say nothin' like this t'other day, when I axed ye 'bout gittin' spliced t' Charlie." The rugged countenance softened swiftly, and a gentle glow lighted the piercing black eyes that studied his daughter's face. "I aim t' hev ye tell me jist how 'tis with ye. Ye seem t' hev got a mighty sudden notion ag'inst pore Charlie. Has this stranger fr'm up yender got anythin' t' do with yer new way o' lookin' at things? Tell me thet, 'Liz'beth." He waited in silence.

A great wave of color flooded the girl's face. She dropped her head in her hands, and sat bowed, unable for the moment to reply, shaken by emotion. The father did not urge her. There was unaccustomed tenderness in the gaze that he held steadfastly on the agitated figure before him. And, too, now that he was himself unobserved, the stolidity of his expression relaxed, and there was a recurrence of the grin that told of a secret satisfaction.

Elizabeth dropped her hands at last, and raised her face, which was radiant in spite of the embarrassment it showed. The limped lusters of her eyes were unusually brilliant, flashing from the emotion that vibrated in her heart. She met her father's scrutiny bravely, and uttered her confession in a voice which, while hardly more than a whisper, was firm, and resonant of pride and joy in the avowal.

"Yes, I—I love him." She hesitated for a moment, and then continued falteringly. "I never knew—what it meant before—love! It's because I didn't know that I thought—I supposed of course I could—marry Charlie. Now, it's all different—oh, so different! I've learned something about what love is—what it means. I could never marry Charlie now. Just the thought of it sickens me. Even if I could never marry him—David, I mean—it wouldn't make any difference about Charlie. No, I couldn't marry Charlie—never!" The abhorrence written on her face gave emphasis to the words. She looked away, brooding, while the father watched her, tracing the trend of her thoughts as she mused by turns on David and Goins by

the changing play of her features from light to gloom.

After a long interval, the chief put a question. As a matter of fact, he had no doubt as to the final answer of that question. He was sure that no man could prove insensible to the beauty and charm of his daughter. He interrogated her now rather for the sake of learning her own attitude than for any other reason.

"An' 'im, now? What about 'im—this feller fr'm some'eres up beyon'? Is 'e a-sayin' as how 'e loves you-all, 'Liz'beth?'"

The girl looked at him, startled, with wide eyes.

"Does this-hyar feller, David, love ye?" he demanded again.

A shadow of fright dimmed the radiance of the face which had been joyous a moment before. Thus far, in the newness of the great emotion excited in her by the stranger's coming, she had hardly let her thoughts dwell on what his feelings for her might be. On the occasions when the idea had occurred to her, she had somehow taken it for granted that his feeling must be like hers. Now, confronted with the blunt question, she found

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herself suddenly overwhelmed with doubt. She realized that she had no actual knowledge of his heart. She had had hope, but no certainty. He had uttered no least word of love to her—only the expressions of a natural gratitude for the service she had rendered him. Now, hope seemed blasted by the crude clarity of her father's question. Her face went white.

She answered tremulously, yet with the courage that was characteristic of her.

"Why, pappy," she said very low, and there was a childish quiver of the curving red lips, "why, I—I don't know!"

CHAPTER XV

NEXT morning early, Elizabeth mounted her pony and rode to the hunting lodge. She was brimming with delight at the manner in which her father had received her confession the night before. She had thought that he would be at least greatly distressed over her refusal to accept Goins as a husband. She had even feared that he might fly into one of his red rages, and insist on the exercise of his authority to compel her acquiescence in the marriage. Thus his tractability in the matter had surprised her as much as it had gratified her. She was somewhat at a loss to understand this unaccustomed adaptability on his part. But she was not minded to disturb herself over reasons why. She was content with the relief afforded, and took joy of it. To add to her happiness, there was the fact that her father showed no disfavor over the presence of David within his territory--seemed rather

to welcome the young man, as was proven by a ready invitation to his own home.

Elizabeth found David and the soldier sunning themselves and smoking comfortably on the level of rock before the cavern. Both men arose as the girl came hurrying down the path from the top of the bluff, and David strode quickly forward to greet her, his face alight with pleasure. He smiled for sheer sympathy as his eyes took in the radiance of her expression. Elizabeth put out both hands, which he seized in a warm clasp, as their glances met and mingled. For a long moment neither spoke while they thrilled under the contact of hand to hand and eye to eye in a delicious intimacy of emotion. The impulse to draw her to him was strong on David, and he sensed in her a yielding as if she were ready to give herself to his embrace. But, once again, the mountaineer fought down the passion that assailed him, though his gaze, charged with tenderness, could not deny his heart, and answered the adoration that shone in hers.

The princess recovered herself first. Something of her usual poise returned to her manner as she drew her hands from David's.

There was still a deeper color flooding the golden tint of her cheeks, and her expression revealed the delight that filled her heart. Her first words explained the cause of her mood.

"It's all right, David. I told pappy, as I said I would, and he didn't make any fuss at all—you know, about Charlie." She had lowered her voice at the name, lest Morris overhear. "And I told him about you, too, David." She spoke shyly now. "He was—oh, so interested! I didn't know—I thought, perhaps—" She broke off, in confusion, but controlled herself, and went on speaking more quietly. "Pappy wants you to visit him at the camp. You must come at once."

"I ought to be on my way," David protested, half-heartedly. "Ye've done enough fer me already. I ain't sick now, an' I don't 'low I've got much of any excuse fer visitin' yer pappy."

Elizabeth dismissed his objection with the imperious petulance of the true princess.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "You'll do as I say, and come home with me right off."

The voice of Morris sounded querulously, with a suggestion of alarm in it.

"And what about me, miss? What's goin' to become of me?"

"Oh, you!" The girl lifted her eyes, and regarded the man disdainfully. "Why, you're to come, too. My father will not interfere with your escape, though he hates your kind. And I reckon you'd better be starting pretty soon after we get to the camp. You can have a guide. If he stayed around long, some of the tribe might get to playing tricks on him," she explained to David. "They naturally despise those Northerners."

Morris scowled, but ventured no comment, and followed the two as they set forth for the Croatan encampment, the girl riding and David walking beside her.

On their arrival at the settlement, David was both astonished and pleased at the warmth of friendliness in the chief's greetings. While Morris was gruffly dismissed to another place in the little village, the mountaineer was taken into Lowrie's cabin and most hospitably entertained there. The chief gave him a share of his own bed, and in every way treated the newcomer as a favored guest. His personal interest in this stranger was witnessed by the constancy of his as-

sociation, which was such as to annoy Elizabeth, who missed the intimacy she had so enjoyed in the cavern. It was evident that the chief took pleasure from the outset in the society of this new companion, and his instantaneous liking rapidly developed into a warm regard. The two talked together freely, for David, in his turn, was attracted by the powerful personality of this autocrat in the wilderness. He responded frankly to the elder man's searching questions, until there was nothing more to be told of his simple history. And all that he learned pleased the chief hugely. But he kept strict silence as to those plans for the future in which David and his daughter were alike concerned so vitally.

Morris was eliminated from the scene on the day he reached camp. Lowrie gave him in charge of one of the older men to be guided to those Union sympathizers who would further his escape.

"He'll git ye t' the undergroun' railroad, an' then yer friends kin look arter ye. Ye'll be safer with them than hyar-abouts. My boys mostly hain't got no likin' fer sich varmints as you-all."

And Morris, frightened by the sullen hatred so plainly visible on the faces of the Croatans, was thankful to be quit of surroundings equally uncongenial and dangerous. He hastened off without even a word to David or Elizabeth, each of whom had succored him in the hour of need.

On a Sunday afternoon, Lowrie and David sat chatting and smoking in the living-room, while Elizabeth busied herself with braiding strands of rawhide into a long whiplash. A group of the younger Croatans was engaged in trials of strength and skill on the level strip of sward that stretched before the chief's cabin. The main attraction was the wrestling bouts where the rivalry was keen, and many of the competitors displayed marked ability. David, who from the circumstances of the case had a particular interest in Charlie Goins, observed with some surprise that the lieutenant took no active part in the wrestling. He questioned Lowrie.

"Why don't yer lieutenant, that Goins, try a fall? He looks plumb powerful."

Lowrie nodded.

"Charlie's right-smart strong," he declared; "pretty nigh strong's I be. 'E ain't

wrastlin' none, 'cause 's too good fer the other boys.'" He cast an appraising glance over his guest's stalwart form. "Mebbe so, you-all kin wrastle some yerself."

David grinned sheepishly, with a muttered word of deprecation concerning his own prowess. As a matter of fact, his exceptional strength and quickness, together with his mental shrewdness, had won him fame as the champion wrestler of his county. Lowrie, after a second and longer scrutiny of the young man, spoke again. There was a trace of eagerness in the rumbling voice, and, too, just a hint of anxiety, as if his suggestion had a graver import than the mere words seemed to justify.

"I 'low now ye wouldn't wanter take a try with Charlie yerself." Then he added, hastily, as though in answer to a smothered ejaculation from Elizabeth: "Course hit hain't no disgrace t' be throwed by Charlie. Ain't nobody kin put 'im on 'is back 'cept me."

Though he spoke so lightly, the chief was already regretting the impulse that had led him to suggest this match. He realized fully that its consequences might jeopardize his

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whole project of making the mountaineer, as his daughter's husband, his successor in the chieftainship of the tribe. The ruler of the Croatans must be their proven master physically as well as mentally. If Goins were to vanquish David in the presence of the tribe, the stranger's prestige would suffer a fatal blow from the defeat. The dismay in Elizabeth's exclamation had brought the truth home to Lowrie. He studied David's form once again as the young man stood up, and what he saw encouraged him to risk the issue, though he was at pains to avoid the reproachful glance of the princess, who expostulated indignantly:

"Why, pappy, David isn't well again yet."

But David himself shook his head in vehement denial of her assertion.

"Shucks, now!" he asserted. "If I was feelin' any better, they'd have t' put a ring in my nose, an' lead me on a rope." The confidence in his glance cheered the girl, though she still feared for the outcome. "I'm willin' t' try yer champeen," he added to the chief.

The matter was speedily arranged, and David and Goins, stripped to the waist,

faced each other with mutual respect, if not liking. David did not make the mistake of underestimating his opponent. He guessed that the Croatan's strength was superior to his own, and determined to place his reliance on excelling in quickness and strategy. To him, however, there was no crisis in this meeting beyond a natural desire to win against one whom he instinctively disliked, and whom he actively detested on Elizabeth's account. Goins, however, was overjoyed at this opportunity of meeting in combat the man whom he regarded as his rival, an interloper threatening his whole scheme of love and life. Neither Lowrie nor his daughter had said anything to imply a change in the lieutenant's status, but Goins was not lacking in intelligence of a sort, and he was able to make a shrewd estimate of the possibilities. The public worsting of his antagonist, while it would by no means satisfy his hatred, would go far toward reëstablishing his menaced supremacy in the tribe.

The chief boomed a command, and the two contestants set themselves to the struggle. For a few moments, they circled each other warily, eying each other alertly, seeking an

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opportunity. Then there came a swift interplay of movements, and the two men were on all fours, grappled. The action was rapid, unhesitating, for each knew just what he meant to do. The circle of Croatans and their chief watched in tense silence, thrilled by a display of force and skill in which the two seemed equally matched. There came grunts of exultation from the members of the tribe when their champion secured the scissors hold, famous for the adversaries it had vanquished.

Goins straddled David's back. His legs locked under his enemy's thighs. Then the constriction by the powerful muscles across the belly would drive the breath from his foe, crumple him to limp helplessness. But David knew his danger—knew his powerlessness within that crushing grip, once the full strength of it was exerted against him. In the instant that Goins secured the hold, the mountaineer acted with every atom of speed and energy which he possessed. His hands clutched the other's toes, and wrenched at them savagely. The shock of the pain forced the Croatan to relax his locked ankles; the legs fell apart. Still in that same instant,

one of David's arms shot up under the lieutenant's shoulder and clasped over the back of the neck; the other slipped to a crotch hold from below. Mighty as his muscles were, Goins found them impotent within that clutch, for the suddenness and sureness of the attack took him at a disadvantage, without a counter. The pressure on his neck weakened him. His frantic effort of resistance was pitifully futile. In a frenzy of impotent rage, he felt his shoulders bent lower and lower toward the ground. Came a heave from the arm at his middle, followed by the impact of the other man's full weight as his body turned, and he crashed full length on the turf, shoulders and hips unmistakably touching the ground before the eyes of all the startled circle.

“Fall!”

The chief's bellowed word snapped the tension. The spectators broke into groups, muttering excitedly, their faces glad or sullen according to their individual feeling toward the beaten wrestler. David got up quickly, and stood regarding Lowrie somewhat self-consciously, his chest heaving from the violence of his exertion, his forehead wet with

perspiration. From her place in the window of the living-room, whence she had watched the encounter in tremors of alternating hope and fear, Elizabeth looked down on the form of the man she loved, and the adoration of her heart was told by her eyes for all the world to see. Goins, rising heavily, saw, and the rage over his defeat swelled to a black hatred that there and then took oath of vengeance against the stranger.

Lowrie spoke with the voice of authority, though he smiled as he met David's eyes.

"Now, youngster, I'll jist take ye on myself."

"But—" David began.

The chief interrupted.

"Got t' down ye, er the boys'd think I was gittin' old."

The subsequent event astounded David by its unexpectedness. He found his skill and agility of no avail now. At once Lowrie wrapped him in an embrace that could not be broken. He was as helpless as a child within the iron arms of the elder man, who stood like a rock, unshaken in any degree by the violent writhings of his victim. It was

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almost with gentleness that Lowrie laid the young man on the ground, while the tribesmen—all save Goins—roared acclamations to their chief.

CHAPTER XVI

COINCIDENCE is only a mystery to us by reason of our ignorance concerning causes. The most extraordinary event is easily explained by a knowledge of all the facts. Thus the meeting of three principal characters in this story, two days after the wrestling, was indeed a coincidence, but that coincidence was the inevitable effect of certain causes working on the wills of the trio.

There was a certain likeness between the moods of Elizabeth and David. Each of them experienced the distress due to a love thwarted. The girl realized daily more and more the fact that some barrier stood between her and the man to whom she had given her heart. She was sure by her woman's intuition that he loved her, and yet he spoke no word. She grieved in silence. The only assuagement was to hope still, even against conviction of the truth. David, for his part, knew what the barrier was that

reared itself between him and this woman of his longing. Each of the two lovers was constrained in the presence of the other, fearing a more explicit self-revelation. Each was inclined to seek relief from the strain in solitude. Each mused with peculiar tenderness on their time together in the first period of their association. That gloomy cavern in the cliff above the Yadkin River became the sanctuary of fondest memories. Naturally, then, each thought of the place as a refuge to be sought for melancholy meditation.

On this autumn morning, Elizabeth, more than ever unhappy over the aloofness of David, determined to ride forth alone. She had just finished attaching the whiplash she had braided to a handle of hickory, which had been deftly fashioned for her by old Amidas Durr, the expert hewer of ax helves for the tribe, who had dyed the wood to a rich red with pokeberries, and had carved the knobbed butt cunningly.

"Just for a ride," she explained to David, as she went out. She trembled with hope that he might offer to accompany her, but he did not. She rode slowly over the wood-

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land trail until she came to the river bluff. There she dismounted, and, descending to the cavern, entered the chamber, and gave herself to bitter-sweet meditations.

She had hardly gone from the encampment, when David, too, slipped away by himself. And his steps were drawn by the same magnet that had guided her. He walked swiftly with the elastic, loping stride of the mountaineer, and his course led straight along the woodland trail over which Elizabeth had just ridden.

Between these two went a third traveler through the forest. Goins had been watching for an opportunity to speak privately with Elizabeth, in the hope of pressing favorably his claims as her suitor. When he saw her ride off, he determined to follow, and did so on horseback. He was careful to maintain a considerable distance between him and the girl, so that she would not be aware of his pursuit. It had rained during the night, and the Croatan's trained eyes easily picked out the hoofmarks of the princess' pony on the soft ground. Despite his carefulness, he came near being discovered by the girl, since she rode at a pace much slower than was

usual with her, so that he came in sight of her unexpectedly. He reined his horse into a place of concealment, behind some chinquipin bushes beside the trail, and then, after a considerable interval, proceeded more slowly. When he found that she was evidently bound for her secret retreat in the cliffs, he rejoiced exceedingly. It seemed to him that fate was playing into his hands by providing this chance of an interview safe from the possibility of any interruption. At last, he would be free to speak his mind in full. He felt a savage glee at the prospect of being able to intimidate the girl according to his will. In his experience of women, brute strength had proved the best subjugator. He would not hesitate to take violent measures, should gentler persuasions fail.

Elizabeth had seated herself on the floor of the cavern, with her back against the bunk, in the posture that had become familiar during the days there with David. Now, the association of her surroundings recalled memories of him so vivid and so tender that they filled her heart with a poignant anguish as she realized how they were apart, not merely as a matter of the miles that lay between at

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this moment, but apart by reason of that barrier of which she knew nothing beyond the dreadful fact of its presence.

The princess lifted her face, which had been buried in her hands. Through the shadowy sadness of her expression flashed a gleam of hope. The crunching of heavy steps had sounded from without. Could it be—David? Had he, after all, followed her? She stood up, her dark eyes aglow with expectation, the curving graces of her form tensed, as she gazed toward the entrance of the cavern. Then the light of the opening was obscured by a bulky shadow. The first glance sufficed to tell that her fond hope was vain. The silhouette had neither the height nor the elegance of David's figure. It was broader, but much shorter, almost squat, with the huge hands dangling from the long arms almost to the knees. It needed no more than the black outline to announce the presence of the one man in the world whom she detested—Goins. Elizabeth uttered an ejaculation of disgust as she recognized the unwelcome visitor. His coming meant that the privacy of her retreat was destroyed. How he had chanced upon the place she could not guess,

but she deemed it quite possible that he had spied upon her. The coming of Goins into this her sanctuary filled her with anger. He profaned the spot sacred to her tenderest memories. She resented his intrusion as an audacity that merited harshest rebuke. Both wrath and contempt were in her voice as she spoke:

“What are you doing here?”

Goins came forward before he replied, until he stood close to the girl, facing her. His small eyes were blinking in an effort of adjustment to the dim light of the interior. His loose lips were twisted into a complacent smirk, which still further incensed the girl. Had his vision been clearer, perhaps he might have read the storm signals in the princess’ sparkling eyes, drawn brows and straightened lips. Or perhaps, even after his eyes had become accustomed to the dimmer light, he would still have been blinded by the vanity that is characteristic of his type. He was a leader among his fellows. He had had some successes with women of a sort. His physical strength gave him cause for self-glorification. He had no knowledge of his faults, and his egotism was unalloyed.

It was inconceivable to him that he could be abhorrent both physically and mentally to the purity of the princess, for of purity he knew nothing at all. He had no doubt that, given the opportunity, he could dominate the girl. And the opportunity was here. So, he answered her question now with conceited insolence:

"I 'lowed ye must be pinin' fer yer Charlie, honey. This is a right-snug place fer lovers' cuddlin'." There was a venomous significance in the latter sentence, for he was thinking of the time that Elizabeth and David had passed together in this retreat.

Elizabeth understood the allusion, and resented it as an insult. She spoke with a cold quietude that should have warned the man before her, but did not.

"This is my private place. I choose my own guests. I do not choose you. Go, please, and never come back."

Goins laughed boisterously. It was a joke that she should speak to him like this, as if he were to be put out of countenance by high-and-mighty airs. She needed to be taught a few things, and he would be the teacher. He had let her play with him long

enough. It was time for her to learn what was what.

"Show!" he exclaimed, in a tone of rough joviality. "This ain't no nice way fer a gal t' talk t' her husban' what's t' be. Ye been standin' off quite a spell now, 'Liz'beth,'" he went on, with a harder note in his voice. "An' I don't aim t' let ye git rambunctious with ary other feller, nuther. 'Tain't fitten, noways. You-all an' me is promised, an' I cal'late as how ye got t' run straight, er it'll be the wuss fer ye." He thrust his lowering face close to the girl's, and scowled at her, and the flabby lips were lifted in a snarl.

Elizabeth did not draw back, but stood undaunted, her eyes meeting the challenge in his with a supreme scorn, as he concluded: "I 'low we-all better kiss, an' make up."

"Kiss you!" the girl retorted; and the loathing in her voice brought a flush to the man's cheeks, thick-skinned as he was. "I'd rather kiss a rattler. You've never kissed me yet, Charlie Goins, and, what's more, you never will."

The fellow's face grew black, and the little, bead-like eyes shone dangerously.

"Ye'r' my promised wife, an' thet's by

the chief's say-so. Thar hain't no goin' back o' thet. I 'low a few o' my kisses'll wake ye up a mite, an' warm ye inter bein' more lovin'-like. An' I aim t' give 'em t' ye."

The determination in the girl's face should have made him pause. But he was mindful only of the gross passion that burned in him at sight of her loveliness. He was sure that his own brutal resources, employed here in this isolated nook where no interruption was possible, would mold her to his desire, would win from her that responsiveness which he craved. He lunged forward. The long arms swept out to embrace her. But the princess had divined his attack. She eluded it by a spring to one side. At the same time, she swung the dogwhip. The lash hissed through the air, and fell across Goins' face, over the eyes. He yelled an oath, and staggered back, blinded. The princess would have fled, for an idea as to the peril to which she was exposed shook her accustomed self-reliance. But the man was between her and the mouth of the cavern, and she feared to place herself within his reach. That this fear was justified was proven a few moments later,

when the mumbling curses were broken off, and Goins turned toward her the blurred, bloodshot eyes, from which the tears were streaming.

"I'll hev ye now, damn ye!" he shouted, and jumped toward her.

Elizabeth dodged, and fled toward the exit. But she was not quick enough. The man whirled, sprang after in a mighty leap, caught her. He held her crushed to him in a vice-like embrace, and bellowed triumphantly.

"Ye'r' mine!" he gloated. "I'll show ye, ye damn' little spitfire! I 'low I'll take them-thar kisses. I'll l'arn ye how t' treat yer promised man."

Even in her desperate plight, the girl's spirit was not broken.

"I'll never marry you, Charlie Goins!" she gasped. "I've told pappy so. Never—never!"

Goins' ugly face, so close to hers that she felt the fetid breath of him in her nostrils, was distorted by an evil grin, leering and unspeakably malignant.

"I reckin ye'r' plumb shore t' change yer mind arter—" he paused significantly—

"arter we've done finished our lovin' hyar
this mo'nin'."

Elizabeth shuddered at the implication in the words. A dread that was like physical sickness ran through her, and she went limp within the constricting arms. She did not gain the merciful relief of unconsciousness, but she was wholly unnerved by the frightfulness of her situation, and so weak as to be utterly helpless. Goins uttered a grunt of satisfaction as he felt her form relax. He lifted her easily, and bore her back across the cavern.

Half-way between the entrance and the bunk, Goins halted abruptly, and, still holding his burden, stood with his head turned a little to one side, listening intently. He heard now, as Elizabeth had heard a little while before, the crunching of heavy steps that approached the cavern. They came swiftly, too, and at the sound of them the Croatan's face changed its expression of lustful cruelty for one of demoniac rage at this interruption of his purpose. His fury was even greater when the newcomer darted into the chamber, and he recognized David.

The mountaineer had been on the top of

the bluff, about to descend to the hunting-lodge, when he was startled by Goins' cries, first of pain and wrath, and then of triumph. David had no idea as to the meaning of the shouts. He did not identify the voice. But the mere fact that they issued from the place consecrated to Elizabeth beset him with apprehensions of some unimagined catastrophe. He had no suspicion of the girl's visit to the spot. Nevertheless, in some vague fashion, he was filled with alarm, and before the echoes of Goins' exultant yell had died, he was racing down the path.

Within the cavern, David stopped short, confused for some instants by the dimming of his sight. The Croatan improved the momentary respite by dropping the girl from his arms. As she fell to the stone floor, he leaped for his enemy.

There had been time for David's eyes to clear. He recognized the man and the girl before him—understood something of the horror on which he had stumbled. An anger even greater than Goins' own flamed in his blood. It was greater, more deadly, because it was righteous. The enormity of the man's offense against the woman he loved roused

David to a murderous frenzy. The brutal carelessness with which the fellow cast her from him maddened the mountaineer. Yet, notwithstanding his rage, David's mind worked clearly. He had no intention of risking defeat by any imprudence. He admitted to himself the superior strength of his adversary, and he meant to keep free from the grip of those arms. His helplessness in Lowrie's clasp was in his memory. He might find himself equally powerless should he fall into Goins' clutch. At all costs, he must strive to avoid that risk. So, as the Croatan charged, David swerved, and jumped outside the sweep of the arms. But, as the other man passed him, the mountaineer got in two blows, which brought grunts of distress, though they failed of other visible effect.

Thereafter for a long minute, it was "fist and skull" between the two. David was far more skilful in his footwork, and placed his blows with greater accuracy. But they seemed wholly unavailing against the Croatan's iron frame. And always he was hampered by the necessity of avoiding the clinch which his antagonist as constantly sought. Sheer desperation at last drove him to

fiercer attacks, in which he was more careless of his own safety. One of his blows sent Goins staggering away from him, and he closed in with the hope of a speedy victory. He swung with all his weight for the jaw. Goins ducked clumsily. David's knuckles glanced from chin to cheek. He lurched out of balance. Before he could recover, the arms he had dreaded locked about him, and he found himself impotent, strangling under the pressure of his ribs against his lungs. He fought as best he could to wrench himself free, though he knew the task was beyond his strength. The only effect of his struggling was to send the two reeling drunkenly to and fro. There was no loosening of the Croatan's hold.

Elizabeth had been shocked out of lethargy by the violence of her fall on the stone floor when Goins spurned her. She sat up feebly, and watched the combatants dully at first, without any personal interest in the conflict. Then, presently, her brain grew active again. She remembered her own peril, and perceived its sequel here in the fight between the two men. She perceived as well that Goins must be vanquished both for her own sake and for

the sake of the man she loved. And, as realization came to her, she groaned in utter despair, for she saw David wrapped about by the gorilla-like arms of their common enemy, and she knew that he could not win clear. It flashed on her then that the sole hope for the two of them rested in her. The fighting spirit of her race burned hot within her. She did not pause for thought, but acted on instinct. As the two men staggered past her, she crouched and sprang, and caught Goins below the knees. There she clung. The momentum of the men carried their bodies forward, but the girl's pull held, and Goins crashed to the floor, dragging David down with him. The under man's head was beaten against the rock. A moaning sigh fluttered from between the coarse lips. The mighty arms unfolded and fell limply at his sides, as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Elizabeth sprang to her feet, exultant, revivified by the downfall of the man she hated. For a moment, she regarded the ugly, flaccid face with mingled scorn and detestation. Then she put her hand on the shoulder of David, who was getting to his feet slowly.

rather at a loss to understand the suddenness of his victory, just when he had abandoned hope. He was wholly ignorant of Elizabeth's part in the affair, and took it for granted that his opponent had stumbled and so fallen.

"Let us go," Elizabeth said gently. There was coldness in her tones as she spoke again. "He'll recover in time, probably. His sort is hard to kill."

The two went forth from the cavern together. As they came into the clean, clear light without, it was as if they shook off from their souls a miasma bred by that other's presence.

"Your coming saved me, David," the girl said very softly, and the music of her voice was vibrant with tenderness; "saved me from worse than death."

It was true that his coming had resulted in her salvation. It was true, also, that his coming would have availed nothing at all without her interposition at the crucial moment. But of that she said nothing to him—either then, or ever.

CHAPTER XVII

THE two covered the miles almost in silence. Neither dared speak much concerning what had just occurred from fear of self-betrayal. Each of them was drawn closer to the other by the peril to which the girl had been exposed. To Elizabeth, after contact with the vileness of Goins, the clean manliness of David became more magnetic by contrast. She longed for his embrace and his kisses as an anodyne for the polluting touch to which she had been subjected. But she realized with a new and keener pang of sorrow that the mysterious barrier still reared itself between her and him. It seemed indeed more than ever formidable, inexorably shutting him away from her, making him remote and unattainable. His face, when she stole a look at it from time to time, was sternly set, and his eyes were studiously averted. Her first elation over having escaped in safety from a frightful danger,

subsided, and in its stead came a pervasive misery. Her heart was aching for the solace of love, which was denied her. A bitter spirit of revolt stirred in her. She was tempted to cry out, to demand an explanation from this man, who went with sealed lips always, though he loved her. But she fought down the impulse, and rode on in a silence that was filled with despair.

David fought even a fiercer fight, and his victory over himself was at the cost of quivering nerves and a tortured heart. The sight of this girl in the arms of Goins had revealed to him with a new and startling clarity her preciousness to him. It was only because for the time being his energies had been consumed in the struggle with the Croatan that he did not take her in his arms, and pour out to her all his heart in words and kisses. As his bodily strength was restored, his will, too, recruited its forces, and he was able to hold himself in mastery. His loyalty to Ruth still persisted, and the power of it was such as to curb any expression of the present passion for another. The simplicity of the mountaineer was incapable of solving the puzzle offered by his own nature. He was

utterly baffled by the problem of his moods. He still thought as tenderly as ever of Ruth. It seemed to him that he loved her as dearly as before. Yet here he found himself all tremulous with longing for this other woman. His primitive mind knew nothing whatsoever of subtleties concerning magnetisms and propinquities and the mounting instincts of his own manhood. He went in silence, since silence seemed the only decent thing for him, but the effort to maintain it racked his soul with anguish.

The two had come almost to the encampment when the princess spoke decisively.

“Don’t say anything about this to pappy.”

“But—” David would have expostulated. Elizabeth, however, interrupted him.

“Charlie has had his lesson,” she declared, confidently. “I told him I’d never marry him. So he knows now. There’s no telling what pappy might do if he knew about it.”

David was doubtful as to the wisdom of the girl’s decision, but he accepted it. His own opinion by no means coincided with that of Elizabeth. He regarded Goins as quite capable of making further mischief, and that of the gravest sort. He said nothing of this

to the princess, however. She was already on her guard, and to excite additional alarm could serve no good purpose. He had half a mind to tell the facts privately to Lowrie in spite of the daughter's prohibition, but finally decided that to do so would be in the nature of treachery to her.

So, the chief remained in entire ignorance of his lieutenant's evil conduct. He was only a little disgusted with the fellow's clumsiness, when, next day, Goins turned up in the encampment with a bandaged head, which he explained by a bad fall on the rocks—the exact truth, without details. He had returned in much trepidation, fearful as to what might befall him at the hands of an outraged father, and his relief was correspondingly great when he discovered that the chief was in ignorance of what had occurred at the cavern. But he wondered mightily as to the cause of this reticence on the girl's part—for he rightly attributed the result to her decision. And soon his speculations found food for vanity. It occurred to him that his violence had, after all, affected the princess in his favor. His abnormal egotism found nothing absurd in this fancy.

On the contrary, it seemed quite reasonable to his warped mind. He cherished it until it became a fixed delusion. He recognized that the stranger was still a rival to be reckoned with. But he convinced himself that, with this obstacle removed, he would be able to establish himself easily enough in the girl's good graces. He took much comfort from the fact that in the contest with David he had proved himself the better man before the eyes of the princess. She had seen him with his adversary practically at his mercy, and she could have had no doubt as to the issue of the battle between them but for her interference. For Goins had been aware of Elizabeth's action against him, which had been the cause of his overthrow. He cherished no grudge against her on that account, but rather an increased admiration for her strength and daring. The result of his slow and difficult cogitations was to leave him certain that he could win the girl to his will, once David was removed. How that removal was to be effected thenceforth engaged his whole attention, and he plotted with the unscrupulousness that was characteristic of him.

For that matter, David himself was similarly occupied in planning his own removal from the scene. He feared for his strength in the constant struggle of self-repression which he was waging. It seemed to him that hourly his powers of resistance were lessening. It became momently more difficult for him to refrain from full confession to Elizabeth. He distrusted the stability of his will. He did not hesitate in his loyalty of purpose toward Ruth, but he became suspicious of his weakness. It occurred to him that his only safety lay in flight. Once this idea took possession of him, he dwelt on it as offering the one possible solution of his perplexities. He considered the matter for a day, and became assured that only by such a retreat could he safeguard himself from despicable treachery. He chose to make his purpose known first to the father, rather than to the daughter, in order to avoid complications.

He took an opportunity to speak when he and the chief were alone together. The old man heard him through patiently, but his comment disconcerted the mountaineer.

"Jist stuff an' nonsense!" he rumbled, and his voice was edged with disdain. "Thar

hain't no call fer ye t' think about movin' on
fr'm hyar fer quite a spell yit."

"But there's reasons why I got t' go," David protested. He decided that a part of the truth might serve to convince his hearer. "There's a debt what I've got t' pay right soon. I set out t' earn that-there money, an' it's time I was busy a-doin' of it."

"If that's all that's a-bitin' on ye," Lowrie responded with a guffaw that set the crockery on the shelves to dancing, "why, by cripes, I'll fix ye out right hyar. I was jist a-thinkin' o' offerin' t' hire ye, an' hyar ye come a-tellin' as how ye want a job. I kin use a young feller like you-all. How'd thutty dollars a month an' yer victuals strike ye?"

The words fairly stunned David. He stared aghast at the chief, unable for the moment to formulate any response. Nor did reflection suggest any method of extricating himself from the dilemma presented by Lowrie's offer. Apart from the complications caused by his feeling toward Elizabeth, this opportunity to earn the money he needed would have been altogether satisfactory, for

the wages were much beyond what he could have expected elsewhere. He could hit on no adequate excuse for a refusal. There was indeed no reason for objection to the proposition, save the secret one, that it would hold him in an intolerable situation. But he could not explain the full truth to the girl's father, and, because he could not, he was left defenseless against the elder man's satisfaction in the project as one already settled on. He could only mumble a few false phrases of grateful acknowledgment, which Lowrie took for acceptance. The chief attributed the young man's obvious confusion to a natural embarrassment over the boon so unexpectedly conferred. For a fleeting instant, David did think seriously of making known the predicament in which he was placed. But he dismissed the idea promptly because, somehow, it seemed to savor of injustice toward both the girls concerned. His decision might have been different, had he known that Lowrie was already aware of his love for Elizabeth. With the fatuousness customary among lovers, he nourished the delusion that he had kept the secret of his heart to himself. He could not guess that the piercing

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eyes beneath the old man's shaggy brows had read the scroll of his emotions like a printed page.

David, thus thwarted in his first purpose of an open departure from the encampment, was driven to determine on a surreptitious flight. Such a method was repellent to his native honesty. It seemed an ignominious thing to do. But he could discover no other way. He resolved to leave the encampment the coming night. Every hour near the princess now increased the strain upon his will, and it was very near the breaking point. He was confirmed in his plan by a sudden suspicion as to the chief's attitude toward him. That suspicion was provoked by Lowrie's final utterance concerning their future relations.

"Thutty dollars is a lot o' money, but I've got plenty salted away, an' so be I mought spend some on hit a-boostin' along a young feller what I took a shine ter. You-all 'pears t' me a pretty-likely sort o' chap, David." He chuckled contentedly. "No tellin' how fur ye might git, boy, with Henry Lowrie t' back ye."

David found an opportunity, later that day,

when he was alone in the living-room, to secure a sheet of notepaper and a pencil. Then he went away by himself into the forest, and there, with a smooth stone for a desk, he wrote a note to leave for the father and daughter, whom he meant to desert by stealth. The composition of the missive taxed his ingenuity to the utmost, and, when he had finally finished the writing, he was disgusted with the result, yet quite unable to devise anything better. He put the message in his pocket, and went back to the encampment, feeling like a criminal. He found the cabin empty, and improved the occasion by a raid on the larder, where he gathered together scant supplies of bacon, flour and coffee. He took the least possible allowance, feeling like a thief the while. He knew that he had no choice, however, for nothing of his own was left from the river, not even his rifle. He made a small parcel of the food, and concealed it where it would be unlikely to be discovered against the time of his departure.

Lowrie, on his return to the cabin, was boisterously merry, in high feather over having come to an arrangement with the young

man. When Elizabeth appeared, he made the fact known to her in manifest expectation of enthusiastic approbation on her part. Nor was he disappointed—at the outset. The girl regarded David's acceptance of her father's offer as a proof that the barrier between them would be somehow removed, and she was filled with delight as new hope flooded her. She turned to David with shining eyes and her lips bending into a happy smile.

"Oh, that will be splendid, David!" she said simply. The cadences in her voice were very tender. "I am so glad!"

David could do no more than stammer an unintelligible acknowledgment. He felt more than ever like a criminal—the thief of this girl's heart.

Elizabeth wondered over the lack of responsiveness in David, at first without particular concern, but soon with a suspicion that, after all, things were not quite as they should be. The suspicion grew into a certainty as the time passed, and the young man appeared taciturn and distract. He plainly avoided her attempts to draw him into conversation; refused even to meet her

glances. The father's good spirits blinded him to his guest's somber mood, but the loving eyes of the daughter took note of every detail, and again her sorrow weighed heavily upon her, for she perceived that the barrier still stood between her and David; a barrier of which she knew nothing except that it was sinister and impregnable. It was with a new and stronger despair pressing upon her spirit that she early said good-night, and went to her room; there to wrestle with her trouble in that infinite and terrible loneliness which comes to one who loves in vain.

And the despair in David's soul, as he watched her go, was neither greater than hers, nor less, but like unto it; for he expected never to look on her face again.

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT same night, Charlie Goins sat late alone, holding communion with himself and seeking inspiration for nefarious schemes from frequent drafts of colorless moonshine out of his brown jug. But the inspiration failed of an effect satisfactory to him, though he drank deep, as was his habit often. His iron body showed no ill effect from his excesses. The fiery liquor seemed to do little more than quicken his movements and stimulate his brain, so that wild ideas came thronging. Each in turn, however, was speedily rejected for one reason or another. It was his purpose to remove the stranger from his path, but he meant to do this in such a manner as to avoid the chief's suspicion of his having any part in the affair. Hate counseled murder, but prudence forbade. It was near midnight when, at last, he hit on a plan that promised to be adequate. He decided that, with the help of his

most intimate crony, Jeames Viccars, he would ambush his enemy, take him prisoner, and deliver him up to the authorities at Salisbury as one who had been actively engaged in assisting a Union soldier to escape from the prison. Goins reflected that in this way he would dispose of his rival for an indefinite time, and perhaps be paid a sum of money in addition. He gulped down a huge swig of the spirits in celebration of his having finally reached a decision, and started to awaken Viccars, who shared the cabin with him, in order to make definite plans for the morrow.

The sudden barking of a dog caused Goins to stop, and listen, for the sound came from close at hand, and he recognized the note of Lowrie's favorite hound. He blew out the candle, and, going to the door, pushed it open softly, and peered out. The moon had just risen. By its light, he made out a shadow moving a little within the doorway of the chief's cabin, which was next to his own. The dog had ceased barking. Goins could hear the hiss of a whisper, and, a moment later, he saw the form in the doorway advance, the dog beside it capering in friendly

fashion. He could make out that the night prowler was a man. He knew, too, that the figure was not Lowrie's. While it was impossible to distinguish clearly in the gloom, he guessed that this could be no other than the stranger. He was surprised and puzzled by the occurrence. He could not surmise the visitor's object in this mysterious night sortie. Then he held his breath, for David was passing within a yard of him. It was now that he saw the parcel which the mountaineer carried. At sight of it, partial understanding came to the Croatan. It was plain that the visitor was making a stealthy departure from the encampment. The fact would have been incredible, but for the evidence before his eyes. It seemed that, without any effort whatsoever on his part, he was to be rid of his enemy.

Goins was, notwithstanding, by no means content. On the contrary, he was made furious by the thought that his foe should escape punishment at his hands. He watched eagerly, fairly shaking with the rage that was on him. He could distinguish David's course down the cabin-lined street of the encampment, which would lead on into the river

trail. Abruptly, the Croatan came to a determination. He pushed the door shut, and sprang to the bed on which Viccars lay snoring.

"Wake up, mon!" he exclaimed harshly, under his breath.

A few rough shakes added to the exhortation brought the sleeper to a sitting position, blinking and gaping. Under the insistence of Goins, Viccars was soon thoroughly awakened. He hurried into his clothes, while the other made rapid explanations.

"Thet-thar cussed galoot is a-skinnin' out, an' I hain't aimin' t' 'low 'im t' sneak off without gittin' what's comin' t' 'im. We'll chase arter 'im, an' ketch 'im. Hurry!"

It was hardly a minute after David's passing the door, when the two men sallied out into the night in pursuit. They ran swiftly down the encampment street, but, when they reached the river trail, moved with noiseless tread, though still rapidly. From time to time they paused to listen. In one of these intervals, after they had gone half a mile or more through the forest, they heard the sounds of David's advance, as he went carelessly without any suspicion of being fol-

lowed. The pursuers now moderated their pace, so as to keep within hearing distance, but sufficiently in the rear to escape detection.

"We'll foller till 'e halts," Goins decided. "Then we'll steal up on 'im, an' jump 'im together. I got rawhides in my pocket, an' while I hold 'im, ye'll tie 'im up."

"An' then what ye goin' t' do with 'im?" Viccars demanded, in a hoarse whisper.

"None o' yer business," Goins growled, in surly rebuke. "An' besides, I hain't made up my mind yit."

At the fork in the trail as it came near the river, David swung into the branch that led southward, and behind him the pursuers kept their place. The three traveled steadily throughout the remaining hours of the night, and Goins had ample time in which to formulate his further plans. He confirmed his earlier decision to take his enemy to Salisbury as a prisoner, and made known his purpose to his assistant. Yet the virulence of his hatred made this project unsatisfactory to him, since he lusted to wreak vengeance with his own hands on the man who had humiliated him in the presence of his fellows. As he shambled forward, his heavily

muscled fingers twitched from time to time in reflex from his fierce desire to be at the stranger's throat.

Dawn was breaking when, at last, David made his camp within a sheltered glade at some distance from the trail itself. Goins and Viccars, moving with increased precaution, concealed themselves behind a shelter of thick-growing shrubs on the side of the glade furthest from the spot where David had established himself, and thence they watched his operations, in readiness to seize the most favorable moment for attack.

"We'll jump 'im when 'e's busy cookin', an' bent over, an' with 'is back t' us," Goins whispered. "When I nudge ye, come on."

There was no hitch in the execution of the plan. David was on his knees before the fire which he had kindled, holding the saucepan over the flames, when the two men stole forth from their hiding place, and crept across the glade, their moccasined feet moving soundlessly on the turf. It was not until they were almost upon him that David, unwarned by any noise, sensed their presence, and turned, startled. But it was too late. Even as his eyes took in the twin shapes

bulking darkly behind him in the gray light, the assailants leaped upon him. It was only a matter of seconds before his capture was fully effected. At the first onslaught, Goins clutched him in arms that were like bands of steel. David remembered that embrace, and realized, with a quick sensation of despair, that, for some inexplicable reason, he had fallen into the possession of Goins. The utter unexpectedness of the attack, too, disheartened him, so that, though he fought desperately, he had no hope of victory. He struggled the harder when he felt his hands drawn together by Goins' assistant, but he was powerless to prevent the binding of the rawhide around his wrists. His one moment of satisfaction was when the fellow attempted to tie his ankles together, and David caught him with a kick in the pit of the stomach, which doubled him up, gasping and groaning for five minutes before he could recover his breath, while Goins cursed him for his clumsiness. In his second attempt, however, Viccars was more cautious, and presently the two men let go of their victim, who lay helpless, bound hand and foot.

"Thar, damn ye!" Goins shouted, his voice

rasping with vindictive triumph. "Take that!" he added, and struck a coward's blow full in David's face. "I'll l'arn ye a thing er two, afore I'm done with ye, ye whelp!" He swaggered around the prostrate man, belching threats interlarded with oaths and obscenities.

David listened in silence until, finally, Goins wearied. Then, he spoke for the first time, with a contemptuous drawl.

"Pears like ye must be a heap fonder of me than what ye say, if ye'r' aimin' t' keep me here jest as I was a-leavin'."

"I 'low they'll do the keepin' o' ye fer me down t' Salisbury prison," Goins retorted. "They're honin' t' git a holt on sick Yank'-runners as you-all." He added a list of unprintable epithets, to which their object appeared to give no heed whatsoever.

As a matter of fact, David was occupied with an intense endeavor to evolve a method of extrication from this new trouble into which he had fallen. Goins' words had made him realize for the first time the danger to which he was exposed at the hands of the Confederate authorities for having aided the escape of a Union prisoner. Hitherto, he

had carelessly regarded the affair with Morris as a matter between him and his own conscience. Now, however, he was forced to recognition of the fact that his impetuous act in assisting the fugitive was a disloyal procedure, for which he might have to pay a serious penalty. It was evident that, in order to avoid danger from this source, he must first of all contrive to escape from his present captivity. How to accomplish this, however, was a question beyond his powers to answer. He stopped his ears to the taunts and jeers of Goins, while he concentrated his whole mind on the problem, but he could find no way out. There were two against him; he was bound and helpless in their power. His final conclusion was that he must wait with what patience he could command in the hope of an opportunity being offered somewhere along the way. At least, he reflected, his captors must untie his feet before setting forth on the long march to Salisbury.

Presently, despite his intention of not listening, David caught something that Goins was saying.

“A puny darn’ pup what has t’ git a woman t’ fight fer ‘im!” were the words that

arrested the mountaineer's attention. He flared instantly, for he was sure that some reference to Elizabeth was meant, although he could not understand the implication.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

Goins grinned evilly, pleased over having provoked his prisoner to a display of interest.

"I was tellin' ye what a wuthless kind o' critter ye be," he declared truculently. "Ye wa'n't able t' stan' up t' me like a mon, but hed t' beller fer he'p fr'm a gal."

"That's a lie!" David answered; and he believed that it was.

Goins sneered.

"Thar in the cliff I hed ye as I wanted ye. I'd 'a' bust ye in a minute more, if so be 'Liz'beth hedn't kotched me by the leg, an' trun me—the sassy cat!"

"It's a lie," David repeated. But now his voice lacked conviction, and the Croatan was quick to notice the change. He stared at his captive malevolently, and then his loose lips twisted in a derisive grin.

"Cussed if I don't believe ye never knew she grabbed me." He roared with laughter, the mockery in which brought a shamed flush to David's cheeks. "An' she never tol'

ye. She sure is a buster, thet-thar gal. She let ye go on thinkin' ye was quite some punkins fer a fighter. Why, ye blasted sucker, I kin lambast the tar out o' ye any day in the week with one han'. An' ye thought ye licked me all by yer li'l' own self. Ho! ho! ho!"

The burst of scornful laughter was echoed by the faithful Viccars.

There was a sincerity in the Croatan's voice that compelled belief on David's part, reluctant as he was to admit the truth, that he had been saved in the conflict by the intervention of the princess. But out of the whirling confusion of his thoughts an idea stood forth for use in this emergency. He acted upon it without an instant of delay. His voice when he spoke again had a different tone, resonant with insolent challenge.

"Ye'r' jest a natural-born liar, Goins. I showed ye up afore yer whole tribe. An' ye'r' lyin' 'bout what happened in the cave, where I whipped ye good an' fair, so ye come crawlin' home next day with yer head in a rag. An' when ye come arter me now, ye had to bring somebody t' he'p ye. Ye hain't got sand t' tackle yer dirty work alone arter

the lesson I give yer there in the cave. Ye'r' a liar an' a blowhard, an' ye can't fight fer shucks. I know, 'cause I've fit ye, an' licked ye, an' tain't no man's job, nuther."

Goins became apoplectic under the gibes. He was wounded in his most sensitive part, vanity over his physical prowess. The resentment that flamed hot in him destroyed all discretion. He gave way to a frenzy of murderous hate.

"I'll show ye!" he screamed. "I'll l'arn ye what Charlie Goins kin do. I'll kill ye with my two han's, an' chuck yer body back inter the river ye come out on. I say, I'll kill ye, damn ye t' hell."

"When I'm tied up, an' with yer man t' he'p ye," David sneered.

The taunt drove the Croatan distracted. He threw off his coat, and leaped upon it. His face was black with rage, the features working horribly.

"Cut 'im loose!" he shouted to Viccars.

"Oh, hell!" David drawled, with an inflection of contempt calculated to madden the Croatan still further. "Quit yer bluffin'. Ye don't dast. Ye'r' plumb scairt o' me."

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"Cut 'im loose—cut 'im loose!" Goins repeated furiously.

Viccars went forward obediently, though with evident reluctance. He would have ventured a protest, but Goins silenced him. A moment later, the blade of his clasp-knife sheared through the thongs at David's wrists and ankles. Viccars sprang aside, as the released prisoner came to his feet with a bound, and in the same instant Goins bore down with a shriek of triumph.

The mountaineer had not been in duress long enough to stiffen the muscles, and he easily stepped aside from the Croatan's rush. The momentum of his plunge carried Goins for a rod or more across the glade before he could check himself. As he turned to attack again, he heard a wild cry from Viccars.

Facing about, he halted in his tracks, and stared, astounded. His henchman was dancing about in wild excitement, yelling unintelligibly. There was no one else within the glade. The prisoner had vanished.

CHAPTER XIX

THE man is a fool who lets vanity stand in his way at a crisis. David was no fool. He had never been a coward; he had never fled from a foe. But, when the great idea sprang up in his brain, he welcomed it, and acted upon it without a thought of ignominy. He played upon Goins' foible. He deliberately taunted the fellow into a frenzy, in the hope that this frenzy would lead to folly, as it did. David knew that his strategy exposed him to the peril of death at the hands of the Croatan. The risk did not daunt him. He accepted it gladly because it offered the sole possibility of escape. He matched his wits against his enemy's brute force. He had no feeling of shame over his device, which was based on running away from the danger. Shame did not touch him then or thereafter for his preference of flight to destruction. So, when Goins hurled himself forward, David, having dodged the rush,

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took to his heels in the opposite direction. Before Viccars had divined his purpose, he had crossed the glade, and was swallowed up in the wood. By the time Goins had learned the truth, his intended victim was a full two hundred yards off. The Croatans gave chase as best they could, but their pace was slow compared with that of the fugitive, and Goins wasted his breath in squealing anathemas on him who fled.

David was a swift runner. Accustomed to the woods as he was, he had no difficulty in traveling fast and far. His best speed was maintained steadily for a half-hour. At the expiration of that time, he was convinced that he had eluded his pursuers, and that with due precaution against surprise he would be safe. His exertions had strained him to the utmost, and he sought a retreat within the shelter of a clump of bushes, where he might be undiscovered even by any one passing within a few yards of him. There he stretched himself on the turf to rest his heaving lungs and aching muscles. When he had rested sufficiently, he went forward again, treading quietly and with eyes watchful for any emergency.

David's course was chosen with reluctance, but, once the decision was made, he advanced resolutely, despite the qualms that assailed him. He had determined to return to the Croatan encampment. There were a number of reasons for this. In the first place, sordid necessity compelled him. His small quantity of supplies remained behind him in the glade where he had been set upon by Goins and Viccars. To return in search of the food would be to invite another encounter with the Croatan. Moreover, he doubted his ability to retrace his steps to the glade.

As a matter of fact, however, the lost rations hardly figured in his calculations. His attention was given, rather, to the necessity of making known all the facts to Chief Lowrie. His adventure had given him a new knowledge of Goins' dangerous qualities. He regretted his promise to Elizabeth of silence concerning the lieutenant's attack on her in the cavern. He meant to break that promise at the earliest opportunity. For the girl's sake, the father must be warned.

David realized that it would be necessary also to explain his own secret departure. He hated the confession this would involve, but

he was in no mood for half-measures, and vowed to make a clean breast of it. The truth might be—indeed, would be—trying to all concerned, but it offered the only means of relief. There must be no further deceit.

David's first rapid flight had led him northward toward the encampment. Afterward, he walked swiftly, and it was not yet noon when he approached his destination. He was just rounding a bend in the river-trail less than half a mile from the settlement, when he was startled by a sudden clatter of hoofs, and a horseman came galloping toward him. It was Chief Lowrie himself, who, at sight of David, pulled his horse to its haunches, and let out a great roar of joyous greeting.

“Why, David boy, consarn ye!” he rumbled. “Whar in Tunket ye been?” The heavy features were radiant with welcome. “We jist nacherly cal’lated ye was plumb losted. Whar in all ‘nation hev ye been?”

David answered promptly, though his embarrassment was painfully evident in his flushed face and in the hesitant tone with which he spoke.

"I set out t' leave the camp last night," he explained. "There's reasons why I couldn't take up with yer offer. I left a note fer ye an' 'Liz'beth. But I didn't rightly tell ye all my reason in that-there writin'."

"Fust I've hearn tell o' any note," Lowrie asserted. His features had become forbidding. "Mebbe 'Liz'beth come on hit, an' was aimin' not t' tell me anythin' till she got good an' ready."

"I 'low I'll have t' tell ye all about it," David returned miserably. "But first I want t' warn ye 'g'inst that-there pesky Charlie Goins."

"What the devil is Charlie Goins t' you-all?" The chief's manner was now suddenly menacing.

"It's a devil of a lot t' you-all," David retorted, with spirit. "I come on him over there in 'Liz'beth's cave, where he'd followed her, unbeknownst to her. She'd kind o' fainted like, an' he was carryin' her in his arms when I got there. He drapped her, an' we fit, an' went down together, an' he got his head broke agin the rock, an' so 'Liz'beth an' me come away."

The chief's face was contorted with rage, and the black eyes blazed.

"Why didn't ye tell me this afore?" he demanded.

"'Cause 'Liz'beth made me promise not t' say anything about it," David replied.

"I'll l'arn 'im t' lay han's on my darter—an' 'er unwillin'," Lowrie said, less loudly than he usually spoke; but his voice was ominous. "Hain't seen nothin' o' 'im t'-day. So be, ye didn't 'appen t' run inter 'im anywhar, did ye?"

David smiled wryly.

"Not edzakly," he stated. "But he run inter me. Fact is, he kotched me, an' planned t' take me t' Salisbury, an' give me up there. But I got away."

"I don't understan' hit a tall," Lowrie responded, frowning heavily. "But I understan' enough t' make me want t' git my hooks on thet-thar snake, an' scotch 'im. Got an idear whar's 'e's at?"

David shook his head.

"Some'res off there, I reckon." He waved his hand toward the south. "I 'low he an' the feller with him are some fur behind,

bein' as how I streaked it right smart arter
I got away."

"I'll round 'im up mighty soon," the chief grated. With the words, he wheeled his horse, and went clattering back toward the encampment.

David followed at a leisurely gait. He had gone less than half a mile, when he drew aside from the trail in order to let a cavalcade of the Croatans sweep past him. Each of the horsemen carried a rifle, and at the head of the company rode Lowrie himself, his massive features set in lines of vindictive purpose.

The party passed without paying any apparent heed to the wayfarer. David went forward again, and soon reached the encampment, where he entered the chief's cabin. As he pushed the door shut behind him, he saw Elizabeth sitting at the little table, with her head bowed on her arms. She looked up at the sound of the door closing. Then she sprang to her feet, and stood staring, her eyes darkly luminous through a film of tears, her cheeks pallid beneath their golden tint. She neither moved nor spoke during long moments, while David, too, stood motionless,

regarding her with all his heart in the steadfast gaze. At last, the girl's breath exhaled in a long-drawn sigh where many and poignant emotions mingled.

"David!" she whispered doubtfully. It was as if she could not believe yet in the reality of his presence there with her.

David went toward her. He went slowly, almost as if reluctantly, as if compelled against his will by some invisible force that was stronger than he. Yet, for all this seeming of reluctance, a supreme delight thrilled in his blood. He had thought never to look on her face again. And now she was there before him. His glances could feast their fill on her loveliness. The joy of the moment shone in his expression. The sight of it warmed her like a rich wine of life. She knew that this was no phantom conjured up by her longing, but the man himself in the flesh, the man whom she loved; and she knew as well that he loved her. She took a step to meet him, and then, without any intention on the part of either, they were in each other's arms. Elizabeth's hands were clasped about David's neck. He held her close, and their hearts beat together in the rapture of

that embrace. Elizabeth's face was hidden in his bosom. David bent his head, and his lips touched the dusky tendrils of hair, whose fragrance steeped his senses in ecstasy. There was no word between them for a long time, nor any further caress.

Presently, Elizabeth stirred, and sighed again—a sigh of exquisite happiness. Then, very slowly, she withdrew herself from David's arms. She looked up at him, her eyes aglow with adoration, her lips curving in a smile of infinite content.

"I read your letter. It said you must go. I thought I'd never see you again, David. I couldn't understand anything—only I suffered—oh, so horribly! And now you're here, David! And I am—oh, so happy!"

Somehow, her frank expression of pleasure in his presence awoke the mountaineer from his dream of bliss. He recalled, with a sickening dismay, the obligation that must hold him apart from her who had so gladly come into his arms. The radiance went out of his face; it became drawn and haggard.

The girl, watching him so intently, saw the change, and was terrified by it. She saw the despair looking out at her from his eyes.

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A like despair fell on her heart, and blotted out all its joy. She knew that the barrier, which for a few blessed moments she had wholly forgotten, still stood, immutable, between her and him.

CHAPTER XX

DAVID fairly ached for the relief of full explanation to this girl, whom, he felt, he had wronged by his silence hitherto. But he found himself tongue-tied, stricken dumb by the suffering written on her face. There followed a period of painful indecision on the part of both, in which no word was spoken. It was Elizabeth who, at last, shook herself free from the spell of constraint that held them mute. She turned toward David with a look of reproach, and spoke in a voice of cold accusation.

"You told pappy about Charlie—there in the cave. You promised you wouldn't."

David welcomed the diversion to any topic rather than the one that so troubled his spirit. He felt no reproach in this matter of having advised the chief of the truth concerning Goins, and so answered confidently.

"I jest had t' tell yer pappy, 'cause that-there Goins ain't noways a safe critter t'

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have around loose. When I found he was willin' t' kill me, I woke up enough t' know as how he might be dangerous fer you-all, too."

At the mountaineer's words, Elizabeth's hands went to her bosom in a gesture of alarm. Her eyes dilated as she regarded the speaker with new apprehension in her gaze.

"Charlie tried to kill you?" she asked hurriedly. Her voice was trembling.

"Why, yes," David replied. "I 'low there ain't no manner o' doubt about that. Didn't yer pappy tell ye?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"No," she declared; and her tone carried an inflection of dismay. "He was just boil-ing over about Charlie, but it was all about what happened over there at the river. I didn't know anything about this other matter between you and Charlie. Tell me," she in-sisted, "what was it?"

David related the story of his adventure with Goins and Viccars. He was curious to know how Elizabeth would regard the ruse by which he had succeeded in making his escape. He was gratified by her comment when he came to the end.

"Thank God," she exclaimed tensely, "you were able to outwit him!" She was silent for a few moments, thinking deeply, and from the expression on her face it was clear that her thoughts were not pleasant ones. When she spoke again, her voice was bitter. Her eyes flashed with a light that was stern, almost cruel in its suggestion. "Charlie has gone far enough, now," she said evenly. "You can leave him out of your calculations for the future. Pappy will attend to him." She smiled, and her face softened. "You see, David, it was because I know pappy so well that I made you promise not to say anything about what Charlie did. I thought Charlie had had his lesson, and would behave himself. I didn't want him punished by pappy in one of his rages. But now, since he's tried to kill you"—her face grew forbidding again—"why, I don't care what pappy does to him. He can't be punished worse than he deserves."

"Shucks!" David expostulated. "What he done t' me wa'n't nothin' so much t' git scairt about. I 'low I wouldn't have been so terrible afeared o' him—even if I did run away from him this mornin'."

But once more Elizabeth shook her head emphatically.

"Charlie's not your sort," she responded. Her lips were bent in a smile that was very tender, in spite of its sorrowful droop. "You couldn't fight him, because he wouldn't fight fair. Likely as not, he'd shoot you in the back next time."

Brave as he was, David shuddered. It was not pleasant to think of himself as treacherously done to death by this villainous enemy. Yet he knew that the girl spoke truly, and that he was exposed to a very real peril. He welcomed the distraction afforded by the return of the chief, who at this moment thrust open the cabin door, and burst into the room noisily.

"Got 'im right smack off," were his first words, roared out in savage triumph. "'Im an' Viccars, both!" He shot a glance at David. "They wa'n't fur behind ye, young feller."

"Then they've been brought in?" Elizabeth questioned. She was plainly heartened by the news that the offender against herself—and David—had been captured.

The chief nodded.



"Both hyar in the camp, under guard, an' waitin' fer me t' pronounce jedgmint agin 'em. Which same shall be jist as soon's I git over my mad—which I hain't done yit by a dum' sight. But I'll be ca'm putty quick, an' then I'll administer jestice on them-thar two skunks. An' may God A'mighty 'ave mercy on their souls!"

The Croatan girl, who was busy preparing the noonday meal, called to Elizabeth. The two men were left alone together at one end of the long room. David improved the opportunity to address the chief in tones carefully lowered, so that the princess should not overhear.

"I've got t' do some explainin' t' you-all, chief," he said, with very evident embarrassment. "I said in that-there letter I wrote as how I had t' go away. I didn't say right out why. Now, I 'low as how I ought t' tell ye the whole business, an' I want a chance t' speak my mind when Elizabeth ain't about, seein' it has somethin' to do with her."

Lowrie fastened a piercing stare on the mountaineer, who avoided it, and was manifestly ill at ease under the scrutiny.

"I aim t' hear all what ye got t' say," he

mumbled. "But this-hyar other thing has got t' be 'tended ter fust. I reckon I'm putty-nigh cooled off enough now t' act as jedge. Leastways, I cal'late I kin keep my han's off thet-thar snake when 'e stan's up afore me—which is a heap more'n 'e's got any right t' expect arter layin' 'is dirty fingers on my gal." At the words, the black eyes flamed with such wrath that David realized in a measure the mighty passion which was held in restraint.

The chief said nothing more, but turned and strode out of the cabin. The mountaineer followed him, partly to avoid being left with Elizabeth, since he did not yet feel able to make his revelation to her; and partly in order to be a spectator at this scene of primitive justice which was about to be enacted.

Lowrie came to a halt on the level stretch of sward before the cabin, and gave an order to one of his men, who was waiting near at hand.

"Bring out the pris'ners."

The fellow addressed passed the word along. There was a stir among the group of men gathered before one of the cabins a little way down the line. The door was opened,

and the two captives appeared, shambling along, their hands tied behind their backs, surrounded by armed guards. When the party reached the chief, it came to a standstill, with the two guilty men facing the autocrat. They stood with hang-dog mien, slouching forlornly, their eyes on the ground. It was plain that they had no hope of mercy. David, from an inconspicuous position behind the circle of Croatans, could see Lowrie's face, and he winced at sight of the ferocity that showed there. It was on Goins that the chief's fierce eyes were fixed. Not once did he glance toward the cringing Vicars. The other members of the tribe awaited the outcome in a mixture of emotions—bewilderment and pleasure being the most conspicuous. All of them were deeply impressed by the disgrace of Goins, who, after their leader, had been the principal man in the tribe. A few particular friends of the lieutenant were genuinely distressed over his downfall, but for the most part his fellow tribesmen were gratified by the calamity fallen on one who had harshly lorded over them. Lowrie explained as much of the matter as he chose with blunt directness.

"I made this-hyar skunk, Charlie Goins, my lieutenant, 'cause I trusted 'im. Now, I've l'arned 'e hain't fitten t' be trusted. 'E's sneakin' an' treacherous an' plumb ornery. Las' night 'e an' 'is man, Jeames hyar, jumped on the young feller what's been visitin' me. Jist what 'e meant t' do with 'im, I dunno, an' I don't keer. Hit's enough that 'e meant mischief t' my guest. 'E'll be punished fer that. They's other thin's, but I hain't aimin' t' say nothin' 'bout them."

He was silent for a few seconds, his features working convulsively. But he controlled himself, and, as he spoke again, the booming notes came without a tremor. "I hereby sentence Charlie Goins and Jeames Viccars to be flogged—fifty lashes each." He turned to a man standing near. "Bring three mule-whips," he ordered.

Not a sound broke the quiet during the short interval until the whips were brought. Then, Lowrie took the whips, which were of the usual sort, with short stocks, tipped with two yards of braided rawhide. He stepped forward, and held out one of the whips to Goins, who took it mechanically, as if doubtful of the chief's purpose. A second whip

was taken reluctantly by Viccars. The chief himself retained the third whip. He returned to his former position, facing the men from a little distance.

"Now, stan' two paces apart," he continued.

The cowed men placed themselves obediently. Their faces displayed a growing apprehension. The encircling crowd of Croatans grinned appreciatively as they guessed their leader's design. Lowrie spoke contemptuously.

"I don't want none o' the tribe t' dirty their han's on sich scum as you-all. So, I cal'late t' ave ye whip each other. An' ye'll make a good job of hit, er I'll know the reason why."

Goins' spirit flared in a momentary revolt. He looked up for the first time, and his beady eyes were like those of a cornered rat.

"I won't do hit!" he gritted between clenched teeth; and, with a curse, he hurled the whip to the ground.

Lowrie's gaze met his lieutenant's squarely. Something in their depths warned the mutineer, and turned him coward again.

"Ye'll whip each other, and lay hit on good, er I'll flog the two on ye myself. An' if I do," he added, and his voice roughened savagely, as he swung the whip aloft, "by God, I'll lay on with all my strength."

There was a short period of hesitation, during which the two condemned men eyed each other askance. It was Goins who made the first decisive movement, for he stooped and picked up his whip. He had been thoroughly intimidated by what he had read in the chief's eyes. He knew that his outrage against the daughter had come to the ears of the father, and that only by strength of will was Lowrie holding his wrath in check. Goins felt those vengeful eyes still flaming on him, though he held his face averted. Under their influence, he was compelled to obey the decree uttered by the chief. He raised his arm, and struck. There was no wilful energy in the action, but Goins was a man of exceptional strength, and, without deliberate intention on his part, the lash hissed sharply through the air, and fell heavily across Viccars' back. A stain of red showed through the thin cotton shirt. The fellow leaped high with a shrill cry of pain. The

whip fell from his hand; he volleyed curses against his assailant.

"Pick hit up. Hit's yer turn t' strike," Lowrie growled.

Of a sudden, Viccars' wrath perceived its opportunity. He snatched up the whip, and swung it viciously, with all his might. The rawhide twined about Goins' body, and brought the blood. The stinging hurt of it made the lieutenant forget for the time being everything except the immediate cause. His eyes glared murderously at his crony. He struck his second blow with a will. The lash bit deep into Viccars' flesh, and evoked a howl of anguish.

Angry before, the wretched victim was now half-crazed. He screamed curses, plying his whip the while with all the speed and force of which he was capable. Nor was Goins less violent and enraged. He, too, rained blows with frantic cruelty. By reason of Goins' superior muscles, Viccars suffered the more punishment. He was a gory spectacle for pity when, at last, the whip dropped from his nerveless hand, and he crumpled down on the ground, writhing and moaning in the torture of his wounds. Goins, indeed, was

not in much better case. The tattered rags of his shirt were soaked crimson with blood, and he must have been suffering torment from the laceration of his flesh. But he retained strength enough of will and of body to stand rigidly erect, still holding his whip, and scowling blackly.

The circle of watchers, which had been held silent and motionless in the grip of excitement, now stirred, and a babel of voices burst forth. But there was an instant hush when the heavy voice of the chief again sounded.

"Take 'em away," he commanded. "Hev the old women dress their wounds. Then put 'em on the worst two hosses we got, an' ride 'em ten mile down the river, an' turn 'em loose." He stared balefully at Goins, who refused to meet his eyes. "The both o' ye are done with the tribe, fer always," he said, with the measured slowness of an authority that must be obeyed. "Ye'r' t' go, an' ye'r' never t' come back—never!"

He turned, and strode into the cabin, and shut the door behind him, while the guards closed in on the two thus formally banished from their place and tribe.

David went quickly away from the spot.

He experienced a slight nausea from the hideous scene he had just witnessed. He realized, with a sudden rush of homesickness, that these people were not his people, nor their ways his ways. He thought of Ruth and the peaceful beauty of the orchard where he had kissed her. A great wave of longing swept over him. A vast loneliness settled upon him like a pall. He felt himself an alien, a stranger in a strange land, and very wretched.

CHAPTER XXI

WHILE David was strolling about the encampment in mid-afternoon, absorbed in moody meditation on the wretchedness of his situation, a messenger came summoning him to an interview with the chief. The mountaineer found Lowrie alone in the living-room of the cabin. He was greeted with a curt nod and a sweeping gesture of one huge hand toward a chair. No time was wasted in unnecessary preliminaries. The Croatan introduced the subject matter of the meeting with his first words.

"Ye said ye hed somethin' t' tell me, young feller, 'bout 'cause why ye wanted t' light out o' hyar so durn' sudden like. Wall, suh, now's yer chance. Spit hit out." The keen eyes were fastened on the younger man in a look that was neither kindly nor hostile, rather it was coldly judicial.

The inquisitorial stare disturbed David. There was no faintest trace of sympathy in

it; only an imperious demand for the truth, without reservation or extenuation. And the truth was not an easy thing to tell—to the father of the girl concerned. The guest felt a strong presentiment that he would fail in making a favorable statement of his case. Nevertheless, he called on the remnants of his courage, and began a rapid, somewhat incoherent narration of the essential facts.

"It's about yer daughter, 'Liz'beth, her as hauled me out o' the river," he began awkwardly. "She's a mighty fine gal, an' I think a heap o' her. 'Tain't jest that I'm grateful t' her fer sayin' my life. There's all that—an' more. It was 'cause o' that—'cause I was afraid I might be gittin' t' care fer her too much that I made up my mind t' light out. Yes, that's the reason I sneaked off in the night." He halted, miserable and ashamed.

Lowrie seized unerringly on the single word that contained a clue.

"'Fraid!'" he repeated, with a frown.
"Fer why was ye afeared?!"

David met the issue squarely.

"I was afeared 'cause I was bound al-

ready." His voice lowered, and there was a reverent softness in it as he continued. "There's another gal back home. We're promised t' each other."

A period of silence followed, in which each of the two men was busy with his own thoughts. David supposed that, of course, his explanation cleared up the affair. Notwithstanding his embarrassment, he was conscious of a distinct sense of relief. His musings for the moment were wholly of Ruth, and they were very tender. Then, he again remembered Elizabeth, and once more his mind was in turmoil. He regarded his passionate dream of her as dead and done; but there remained the difficult, the painful task of making plain the fact to her. That would be a trial far different from this talk with the father. He knew, without vanity, that he had all unwittingly engaged her affection. The telling of the truth to her would be a heart-wrenching thing. He felt guilty as never before, blaming himself bitterly as the cause of what this innocent girl must suffer. The fault, he acknowledged, was altogether his. He alone had been the active agent whose unforgivable folly brought about an

intolerable situation. His careless yielding to a sensuous mood had encouraged the girl to bestow on him the priceless treasure of her love. True, he had not made direct declarations in words. There had been no need. He was well aware that every glance of his eyes there in the cavern had told her the thing she longed for. Afterward, he had tried to play his part with more discretion. His suffering in the effort—and the suffering he had inflicted on her—had been sufficient to deserve some good result, as it seemed to him. Yet, in the end, the effect of his struggle had been only that, at sight of her to-day, he took her into his arms, and laid his lips to her hair. At memory of those delicious moments, David's mood changed once again. His pulses quickened, and his heart warmed with desire for this woman, so beautiful, so admirable in every way, so strong, so sweet, so gentle, so winsome, who loved him. Again, he felt the rapture of that embrace; again, the soft fragrance of her hair was like incense in his nostrils. He quite forgot Ruth—until the voice of Lowrie rudely jarred him back to consciousness of the present.

The chief spoke gruffly, but still with his judicial manner. He spoke, too, with decisive emphasis, as one laying down the law, as one whose authority was not to be denied by any other person; least of all by the callow youth there before him, who listened at first in startled astonishment, then dumfounded, as the argument penetrated his brain, and filled his heart with a medley of emotions.

"Thet-thar gal back in yer mountings is out o' hit now," Lowrie announced succinctly. "She don't count no more—no more a tall." He paused for a few seconds to let his words have their full effect on the hearer, who stared uncomprehendingly.

"But—" David would have protested.

Lowrie interrupted with a strident ejaculation of impatience.

"Listen hyar!" he ordered; and the mountaineer perforce obeyed. "Don't ye see?" he demanded, with evident contempt for the other's obtuseness. "Don't ye understand the plain facts? When you-all sot out fr'm hum, ye belonged t' thet-thar gal o' your'n. I don't aim t' deny thet none whatsoever." The chief paused anew, as if to let his

phrases sink in. Then, presently, he resumed speaking with ponderous gravity.

"Since, they's been things happenin'. You-all got kotched in the river, an' yer head busted agin a stun. Ye come right-smart cluss t' dyin' right then an' thar. Ye know that?"

David nodded a wondering assent to the question.

"Wall, keep that in yer mind," Lowrie charged. "Furthermore, they's another p'int t' be considered. Hit was my darter what pulled ye out o' that-thar river. So be, she hedn't seen ye an' grabbed ye, ye'd 'a' been a goner, sure pop! So, hain't hit?"

David nodded for the second time, while Lowrie's expression softened to complacency. He appeared gratified by the shrewdness of his own reasoning, which he was now about to display to his less astute auditor.

"My darter saved ye fr'm bein' drownded over thar in the river. Thet-thar other gal o' your'n didn't save ye none; she didn't even he'p none. So, ye see, that-thar gal o' your'n losted ye thar in the river. Fur's she's consarned, ye'r' drownded. Understan'? Ye'r' dead t' that-thar gal, an' thar kain't be no

resurrection fer ye—not so fur's gittin' spliced goes nohow." The chief wagged his massive head impressively, and ran his fingers through the thick thatch of waving gray hair, while David regarded him in mute amazement. "Ye belong t' somebody else now. Hit's fer 'er t' 'ave the say-so 'bout yer life, I cal'late. She saved ye out o' the river, an' so ye'r' 'er'n. If so be she wants ye fer 'er husban', why, that's hit. Then ye'll marry 'er. Ye see how 'tis, don't ye?" The fierce challenging stare with which he regarded his guest was disconcerting.

David strove to clear his muddled wits. He was aghast over the extraordinary theory so strenuously advanced by Lowrie. The idea was essentially preposterous, but he realized with dismay that it was enunciated in all seriousness by his host. Already that very day, he had seen the man display his autocratic temper, and he had no reason to suppose that this chief of a tribe would be less stern in dealing with a stranger than with any other who ran counter to his wishes. He cast about in his mind for some means of overthrowing the elder man's argument, but in the very simplicity of that argument

lay its strength. David guessed that the finer points of personal honor involved in this matter of abandoning one girl for another would be deemed of no importance by Lowrie. The Croatan had made plain the fact that he would not refuse this stranger as a suitor for his daughter's hand. On the contrary, he showed a disposition to welcome the young man as his son-in-law. His lack of scruples made it extremely doubtful if he could be convinced that the man he favored owed a duty to any girl other than his own daughter. David gave up the attempt to find a worth-while argument against that advanced by the chief. His honesty compelled him to make a blunt avowal of his sentiments in the affair. He knew that he could not make them appeal to his hearer, nor did he try. Very reluctantly, for he divined the hostility he would provoke by his declaration, he stated his attitude.

"Why, chief, I couldn't go back on my word. I'm pledged t' Ruth. Whatever ye say 'bout my gittin' drownded in the river, an' bein' saved from it by yer daughter, I can't he'p knowin' I'm still bound t' Ruth. She's the gal I'm goin' t' marry." He al-

most added that she was the only girl in the world whom he wished to marry, for just now his exasperation against Lowrie extended in some degree to the daughter. But discretion checked the phrase on his lips. He felt that it would be unwise to aggravate the man unnecessarily.

It seemed as if the sense of the words did not penetrate Lowrie's understanding for a few seconds. At least, there was no change in his expression at first. When the change did come, it was swift and menacing. The brow and the bits of cheek above the high-growing beard showed purple, and the veins stood out in blue-black ridges, swollen with blood. His big body grew visibly bigger, expanding with the rage that welled up in him. David could hear the grinding of the teeth as the jaws clamped shut, and then moved under the impulse of his wrath. But the black eyes most proclaimed the fury that possessed the man. They were flaming, darting the lightnings of hate as if to slay this presumptuous youth, who thus dared to flaunt his daughter. The great hands, resting on the arms of his chair, clenched with such force that the red and roughened skin over

the knuckles showed smooth and bloodless white from the tension.

David experienced a moment of physical fear. He expected that in the next second the chief would leap upon him to crush out his life in blood-lust aroused by the insult to the beloved daughter. He maintained his position without outward flinching, but the blasting look in those eyes seemed to shrivel the soul within him. For a few horrible instants, he was fairly sick with fear. He had felt the grip of those arms once, when they had held him in a clutch that was kindly, yet of remorseless strength. Now, the might of them would destroy him, for he had no force with which to oppose their vast power. He had heard talk of things the chief had done when in a red rage. He had paid little heed to the tales at the time, but now they came surging into memory, and served to weaken his spirit still further. David sat without a change of feature, motionless and stolid to all appearance. But his heart failed him. He expected no less than death.

For that matter, David was as close to death that day in the cabin as a man may be and live. For a little, Lowrie was indeed

mad with passionate resentment, by reason of the dishonor, as he deemed it, put on his daughter by the young man who owed his life to her. He had been wholly sincere in his warped view of the case. He believed that this youth's future was at the absolute disposal of Elizabeth. Since the girl had chosen him as her mate, her mate he must be. This resistance on his part was a monstrous thing, unbelievable, unendurable. Lowrie regarded David's refusal to acquiesce as nothing short of a crime. That crime merited death. The young man had spurned Elizabeth, had declared that he would not marry her, that he would marry another girl. The offense was supreme; it deserved the supreme punishment.

Yet, the cause of David's great peril was also the cause of his escape from it—Elizabeth. In his wrath over the outrage against his daughter, Lowrie was ready to do murder. But, before he could yield to the impulse to slay for her sake, there came a check on that impulse—the thought that perhaps he ought rather to spare, still for her sake. There flashed on him a memory of the time when he and she had talked together, and

she had told him so tremulously, yet so bravely, that she loved this man who had come to her from up beyond. And if she loved him, the killing of him would hurt her. Lowrie, with all his savagery, was not minded to harm his daughter. She was the one creature in the world whom he loved, whom he would save from all pain, to whom he would bring all happiness within his power. While he thought of these things, the first wildness of his anger passed. The crimson haze that had risen from his heart to fog his brain, lifted, and he was able to think clearly again. It occurred to him that, after all, it could not prove to be a very difficult thing to bend this stranger to his will. The youngster's foolish ideas of duty could be perverted easily enough. Surely, it could only be a question of time. And there was Elizabeth herself, whom, assuredly, no man could resist. The purple hue died out of his face, leaving the usual ruddy brown. His mind considered the problem briefly, and reached a decision. The hands on the chair-arms unclenched. The fires still glowed in his eyes; but the flames were no longer deadly.

David, watching furtively, saw that the crisis was past, and he rejoiced with all the lusty strength of his young manhood that the life was still in him. He stirred for the first time since he had spoken. He gave no other outward sign of the emotion that had shaken his soul.

But the first feeling of inexpressible relief for his escape was speedily modified, and David was beset with new cause for tribulation. The chief's voice sounded again, and the listener realized that the issue between them was by no means determined, only postponed.

"I'll give ye time t' change yer mind," was the harshly uttered decree. "P'r'aps, sometime, I kin forgive ye fer what ye've said, so bein' as how ye'r' young an' foolish. I'll give ye a chance t' see the light. I'm sparin' ye 'cause I love my darter, an' hit might make 'er sorry if I was t' kill ye hyar an' now. I cal'late a week orter be enough time fer ye t' git rid o' yer fool notions 'bout thet-thar other gal. So, I'll give ye a week t' decide."

"I can't change," David declared. He spoke almost humbly, but with a certain in-

flection of dogged resolution. "I've got t' do what I think is right."

Lowrie did not flare in a new rage as David had dreaded. The chief had himself well in hand now, and he answered in almost his usual manner.

"Ye'r' t' 'ave a week. When that's up, if ye hain't seen the light, hit'll be the wuss fer ye." He chuckled roughly. "But I 'low that ye'll git yer eyes open afore the time's up. An' now, ye kin hev yer ch'ice. I'll hev ye trun inter the guard-house, an' kept thar safe an' sound while ye'r' doing yer thinkin', er ye kin stay right on hyar in the cabin just as ye've been a-doin', if ye'll give me yer word not t' run away. I'll take yer word fer hit, boy, 'cause I think ye'r' honest, even if ye 'ave got some damn'-fool notions. What say?"

David had no hesitation in passing his word that he would not attempt to escape within the time limit of seven days. On the contrary, he welcomed this reprieve as offering a hope of ultimate escape from his predicament. He was sure that he could depend on one strong agency in his favor—Elizabeth. His knowledge of the girl was such that he

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had a fine respect for her high ideals of conduct. He was convinced that her estimate of his duty would agree with his own, no matter what the cost to her personal desires. He felt that he could depend on the exertion of her influence in his behalf as against the despotic will of her father. He was only anxious now to hasten that revelation to her which hitherto he had so weakly postponed. He was glad when Lowrie, without another word, abruptly got up from his chair, and left the cabin. David resolved to seek Elizabeth at once, to tell her all, to throw himself on her mercy.

CHAPTER XXII

WILLIAM SWAIM'S conscience was ill at ease after the departure of David. Neither his wife nor his daughter accused him openly for his part in the affair, but the expression of their faces was a constant reproach, as was their manifest avoidance of any reference to the absent young man. He was especially distressed by the manner of Ruth toward him. There was a certain aloofness in her air that was new in her treatment of him. It was as if she meant deliberately to shut him out of her confidence. And Swaim loved his daughter deeply. She was the most precious thing in his life. Now, he knew that he had wounded her sorely. He feared lest his violence and injustice toward David had alienated the girl's affection. The thought was very bitter. It was made the more painful from the fact that his conscience put all the blame on himself. To add to his trouble, he experienced a sense

of personal loss from the departure of David. In his own peculiar fashion, he had liked the lad. He had come to regard him as his future son-in-law, his successor in the cultivation of the farm in which he took great pride. His own hasty yielding to an angry impulse threatened to destroy the whole fabric of his plans for the future. Finally, Swaim was distressed over the probable consequences of his act in connection with Simmons, David's father. The man was his one close friend. Swaim grieved to think that this friend might be changed into an enemy when he returned to learn how his son fared at his neighbor's hands.

It is not the custom of the dwellers in this region to make apology even for known faults, or to express regret, no matter how sincere their penitence over some wrong deed. Swaim, for the life of him, could not have voiced his remorse over the treatment of David. He longed to restore himself to the good graces of wife and child, more especially to reëstablish himself in the favor of his daughter. But he was unable to speak of the thing that lay so heavy on his heart. He could not put his feeling in words. He

could only go about in a mute misery of appearance that was half-pitiful, half-absurd. By every means in his power, except open confession in speech, he made plain the fact that he had done wrong and that he was exceedingly sorry for it. He went out of his way to make innumerable suggestions for the comfort and pleasure of his women folk. He even carried this so far as to open his purse-strings of his own accord, for the first time in the history of the family. He displayed indeed what was to him—and to them, for that matter—a truly lavish generosity.

The women, for their part, understood very well the workings of Swaim's mind and heart. Both were aware of his project as to a marriage between Ruth and David, though the subject had never been discussed except in strictest confidence by himself and the elder Simmons. The wife and daughter knew also how Swaim was now suffering from the pangs of conscience. Whatever sympathy they may have had for the transgressor was promptly stifled, or at least they did not let it show to him in any way. It seemed to them that this discipline was good for the man who had hitherto been so niggardly.

While they mourned the disappearance of David, they secretly rejoiced in its effect on the head of the household, and had no wish to shorten his time of tribulation. So, Swaim went about his daily tasks full of contrition, constantly made greater by the demeanor of his family toward him. He felt very sorrowful and very lonely. In this mood of abjectness, when seeking by all means to make amends, he even tried to render himself more agreeable in his daughter's sight by a complete change in his treatment of the fawn. Where before he had declaimed against the wastefulness of feeding the useless "critter," he now went to extravagant lengths in the other direction. He carried tit-bits in his pocket, which he offered whenever Mollie came near. The effect was immediate. Where formerly the fawn had been shy of him, had usually fled at his approach unless supported by Ruth's presence, it now welcomed his advances greedily, and soon ran to meet him whenever he appeared. It was not long before the daughter, to her astonishment, and much to her indignation, discovered that Mollie would only come to her after repeated calls—sometimes not then.

The fawn preferred mincing daintily in the wake of the grim old man, in whose pockets were wonderful stores of corn and sugar and even—oh, irony of fate!—those limber-twigs apples, the cause of David's downfall.

It seemed good to Ruth and her mother, now while their wishes prevailed, that the girl should go on a visit long planned, to her maternal grandparents at Bethania. This would include also a visit to a school friend at Salem, where she might shop to advantage while the father's generosity was still unchecked.

Ruth was especially glad to go at this time, since she had a deep and reverent affection for her grandparents, and in the atmosphere of the home there was a serenity that always laid a spell on her spirit. Ambrose King and his wife were Quakers, and the peace in their souls radiated out in soothing effect on whomsoever came within the sphere of its influence. Just now, Ruth craved that tranquilizing solace for herself. David's departure, following immediately on their mutual confession of love, left her a prey to a loneliness unlike any she had ever known before, which fairly bewildered her. She was by no means

all unhappy, but she was troubled and disturbed by her present lack of that new thing which had come into her life and for a few hours so filled it with joy. It was with the hope of spiritual comforting that, on a day about a fortnight after David's going, she mounted her horse at early morning, and rode east over the score of miles that lay between the farm and the tiny Moravian village of Bethania. And by a curious twist of fate, she rode to find not the peace she longed for, but pain and grief beyond any she had ever known, beyond any she would ever know again.

The aged pair greeted her warmly, and at the very outset the calm of the home settled upon Ruth's spirit, and she was at peace, as she had hoped to be. This endured for a few hours. Then came the change—blasting as a lightning bolt.

Ambrose King and his wife carried the principles of their religion into every action of their lives. Because they believed in peace absolutely, they could not believe in war at all. They admitted no justification for it, they had no sympathy for it in any of its aspects. In the vital struggle between North

and South, they held to an impartiality that was complete because it was based on the denial of any righteousness at all in warfare. It was a natural outcome of their principles that the pair should give succor to the war's victims, irrespective of local prejudice. It became known to Union sympathizers that they could be depended upon to give food and shelter to any escaping from a Confederate prison. So, it chanced that on the night following Ruth's arrival at her grandparents' home, there came stealthily, as soon as darkness had fallen, one of those fugitives thus making his laborious way northward toward safety by the underground railway.

Ruth was sitting in the living-room of the little house with her grandparents, gossiping over local matters, when a soft knock sounded at the door. The old Quaker opened it at once, and a man slipped furtively into the room. Ruth regarded him with much curiosity, for she immediately suspected what manner of visitor this might be. She saw that he was rather short, but broad-shouldered, evidently one of considerable strength, though now gaunt and weakened. His form seemed even more attenuated than it really

was because the clothes he wore were much too large for him. The emaciated face was almost wholly concealed by a short, bristling red beard, above which showed watery, blinking eyes, with inflamed lids. The fellow whispered a few words to King, and at a nod from her husband, the wife busied herself with setting out a substantial meal on the table. Forthwith, the newcomer seated himself and ate wolfishly. But, when the meal was ended, and he had accepted a pipeful of tobacco from the old Quaker, Morris—for such, he informed them, was his name—relaxed, and without any pressing proceeded to relate his experiences. Ruth listened with the eager interest of a girl whose life contained few excitements. She was thrilled by the fellow's story of his leap into the river when pursued by the bloodhounds, and his subsequent adventures. She had no inkling as to the identity of the "young feller" in the boat, until Morris spoke David's name. At the sound of it Ruth's heart leaped, and she sat quivering, greedy for news of the man she loved. She did not speak. There was no need to question. Morris was by nature garrulous. He loved to talk of himself

always, and in this instance, talk necessitated constant mention of his companion, David. Luckily for Ruth's powers of self-control, he spoke throughout in friendly fashion of David. It was only when he passed on to the second period, the one spent in the hunting shack on the cliff overlooking the river, that the soldier allowed rancor to show. It was provoked by the enmity which he still felt toward the princess for the disdain with which she had uniformly treated him. His feeling toward her extended also in some degree to David, when he thought of the two as they were together. So, he sneered in his mention of them, while Ruth listened, at first altogether incredulous, then affrighted, half-convinced. She would have cried out now to accuse this vile Yankee of lying about her David, but the rush of emotion held her dumb, powerless to question or deny.

"That Injun girl was a fine-looker, if there wa'n't anything else good about her," Morris declared. "This David chap got stuck on her right smack off, an' she got stuck on him first off she set eyes on him. They had a Jim-dandy time there in that cussed cave together. I kept out most of the time. That

suited me, an' it suited them, too—you bet!" He tittered suggestively. "They made me sick with their lallygaggin'. Her pa peeked in an' saw 'em there spoonin'. I thought he'd have shot the cuss, but I guess he thought it would be better all round to have a white man for a son-in-law. Anyhow, he didn't make a row, an' the next day the girl took David home with her, bold as brass, an' the old Injun chief took him right into his own cabin. He started me off the same day, an' I don't know nothin' about what's happened since. But I miss my guess if David ain't married to that squaw by this time. Leastways, if he ain't, he ought to be." Morris snickered over his vicious innuendo. "One thing certain, if that old sockdolager of a chief wants that young feller for a son-in-law, David ain't got a chance in the world of gettin' away without marryin' the girl."

There came a slight swishing, rustling noise, a soft thudding sound. Startled, the soldier and the two old persons looked around. They saw Ruth lying huddled on the floor, where she had slipped so quietly from her chair in a dead faint.

* * * * *

Ruth, when she returned to consciousness a half-hour later, found herself undressed and in bed, with her grandmother hovering about her in tender solicitude. She made light of her attack, and was soon left to sleep. But there was no sleep for her that night. Throughout the hours of darkness, she was tortured by the visions of imagination conjured by the evil words of the Northerner. For the first time, she knew the anguish of jealousy. She tried to hold fast to her faith in David, but loyalty was sorely taxed, and the effort left her weak with despair. She pictured this savage princess as a vampire, beautiful perhaps, with wanton lures, cruel, conscienceless, hungry to devour the one she held so dear, the one who was more than life to her. Tales she had heard of the Croatans came thronging into her memory now—tales of rapine and plunder, and worse. She was terrified by the thought that David was exposed not only to the allurements of an unscrupulous woman who wanted him, but also to actual perils from his new environment. She thought of him as weak and helpless from his hurt in the river, unable to free himself, even should he so desire, from the wiles of the

woman and the physical restraints imposed by the Indian chief. She felt her love threatened with complete disaster. The prospect almost maddened her.

Out of the confusion of Ruth's thoughts, a desperate plan was at last evolved. She craved action in this crisis. She could not endure the idea of remaining passive while her lover was being taken from her, either willingly or by force. She determined to learn the truth for herself. It would be better to know the facts, even at their worst, without a moment of unnecessary delay. The suspense was not to be borne. She confronted the possibility of finding David unfaithful to his love for her. In that case, it would be the end. Her heart would break. But there was another possibility. It might be that David was in duress. It might be, too, that somehow, with the resources of love equal to any task, she might find a way to aid him, to release him, to bring him back to home and her and love.

Ruth had no difficulty in carrying out her rash project without attracting any suspicion from those about her. She merely rode forth next day on the road to the south,

ostensibly to visit a school friend and to do her shopping in Salem, twelve miles away. As a matter-of-fact, however, she halted in Salem just long enough to purchase ample supplies for a few days' trip through the wilder country to the southward. Thereafter, she set forward resolutely over the rough trail that led toward the Croatan encampment. It was a distance of full seventy-five miles, as she had learned by inquiries, but she faced it without a tremor of fear. Her fear was all for the danger that waited at the end of the trail, and this was a fear not of physical ills, but of peril to her heart's happiness, of peril to the man with whom that heart's happiness was concerned. From the few dwellers along the trail, she secured such directions as she needed, evading as best she could the frank curiosity of those whom she encountered. She camped by night bravely enough within the shelter of some forest thicket, where she kindled a fire, and cooked her meal over the blaze, and afterward rolled in her blanket, to lie restlessly, wide-eyed through the long hours, or to dream of dreadful things.

It was on the third day that she came into

the cross-trail—the river-trail, which ran west from the main road to the Croatan encampment. She had gained information concerning the distances here. When she had come, as she judged, within a mile of the settlement, she tethered her horse in the concealment of a clump of old-field pines, and went forward very cautiously on foot. When, finally, she came in sight of the cabins, she left the trail, and made a detour through the woods to avoid observation. She advanced cautiously, without being detected, close to the clearing, where she halted within a cluster of high-growing gallberry bushes. Here she peered out to reconnoiter. Just in front of her hiding place, not a rod away, a walled-in spring bubbled from the ground, and the stream from it ran purling daintily past her where she stood tense and watchful.

Ruth saw two figures coming slowly across the open space toward the spring. It seemed to her that in this instant the heart within her died. For one of the two was David, and the other was a woman—a woman slender and tall, who walked with graceful ease, whose head was poised haughtily, whose face was beautiful.

CHAPTER XXIII

DAVID, returning from a short walk in the woods, saw Elizabeth enter the cabin, and immediately reappear, carrying the water pail. He knew that she was on her way to the spring, which was a hundred yards down the slope, on the edge of the clearing. He realized that the opportunity he desired was at hand. None of the cabins was near the spring, so that there, though plainly visible, they would be out of earshot, and at this hour of late afternoon, they were likely to be free from interruption. So, he hastened to join the girl, who smiled wanly in greeting as he approached, but spoke no word. David, too, was silent. He walked by her side in a mood of deep dejection, pondering heavily on the things that he must say to her, and wondering what effect his confession would have on her. By tacit consent of both, they waited before speaking until they should come to the spring.

Elizabeth, too, was a prey to depression.

A single glance into the young man's face had sufficed to show how ill at ease he was, how utterly wretched. She knew intuitively that his trouble concerned her, that it had to do with the mysterious barrier which reared itself between them. Moreover, she had read between the lines in the note he had written, and understood from it that he was compelled to leave her. She did not quite know whether his departure was voluntary or not. She dared hope that his flight had been caused by something against his own will, which he was powerless to resist. Then, at the moment of his return so unexpectedly, she had been too weak to withstand the longing of her heart, had gone to his arms. She had rested within that shelter in a joy that was perfect, though so pitifully brief. For a few glorious seconds her heart had beaten in unison with his, with no thought of things past or to come, but only the rapture of the present.

She had felt the light touch of his lips as he kissed her hair, and the exquisite thrill of it stirred again in her memory now as she stole a glance into his face. But she remembered, too, her horrible awakening from the

dream of bliss, when the man she loved had stood apart from her, and had let her go from him without a word. She had realized then that her happiness was seriously threatened, if not already destroyed. Yet, she continued to hope, because, as it seemed to her, if she could not still hope, she must die. Now, as she walked at his side, watching with secret glances the face she so loved, the somber expression of his features chilled her with a fear of irreparable disaster. His silence, the gravity of his air, the downcast eyes and sternly compressed lips filled her with dire forebodings. The oppression on her spirits grew heavier. It required all the strength of her will, which was not small, to maintain the semblance of self-control. Her soul was aching with desire for this man's love. For a few splendid days, she had believed that he belonged to her, that his need of her was as hers of him. But afterward the shadow had fallen between them. It lay there still. Now as they walked onward together the gloom of it lay dark upon them, and blotted out all the light of the world. And still she dared to hope that he loved her. It seemed to her that she could endure all

things—parting, even life without him, or death, which would be easier—if only he loved her. She feared somehow, with a subtle woman's instinct, that his heart was not after all in her keeping. And still she dared to hope that he loved her—else her heart must break.

Ruth, from her place of concealment among the gallberry bushes, saw the two come down to the spring, but her ears caught no word spoken by either as they approached. She noted with a wonder that was half pleasure their sorrowful faces. She wondered still more when she saw this other girl seat herself on a fallen tree trunk by the spring still in silence, while David, equally mute, stood before her in an attitude of constraint. It was a long minute before the young man's voice sounded. For a part of the interval, Ruth's eager glances studied his face fondly. She rejoiced to see the hue of health in his cheeks; she grieved over his careworn expression. She attributed it, and rightly, to the woman beside him, and hatred quickened in her for the one, corresponding to her love for the other. Then her gaze went intently to that woman, and rested there.

The sight of the other's face worked a curious spell on Ruth. The contempt and loathing that had filled her were subdued little by little as she surveyed the pure and lovely face of Elizabeth. Despite herself, the girl recognized the essential nobility of her rival. She struggled in vain against her changing impressions. She was forced to acknowledge against her will that here was no wanton creature such as had been suggested by the soldier's slurring tale. She could not deny the dignity and wholesomeness of this princess before whom David stood in such humility. Clashing emotions made tumult in Ruth's bosom. She felt utterly at a loss to understand this situation on which she had intruded. Bewilderment overcame her. She was sure only that she had utterly misjudged this girl whom a venomous tongue had slandered. She must revise her judgment through and through. But even as she admitted how great had been her error in estimating the princess, Ruth was terrified before the reality. She had been prepared to war against a wanton, to go to any length in order to rescue David from his bondage. But now she found her-

self confronted with a task altogether different and infinitely more difficult. She must face and triumph over a rival who was both beautiful and worthy. Ruth had little vanity and less knowledge of her own loveliness. In this moment of meeting, she had no doubt that the other was her superior in every feminine charm. She could not wonder that David should prefer this gracious stranger to herself. But the admission of her own inferiority left Ruth stricken. Black despair fell on her. As she crouched in her ambush and stared out on the two the look in her eyes was that of a creature wounded to the death. And then, at last, there came to her ears the voice of David, speaking very softly, brokenly.

"I've been with yer pappy. I told him what the reason was why I ran away last night." He raised his eyes for the first time in a fleeting glance toward Elizabeth, but the expression on her face was inscrutable, and gave him no assistance. He looked down at the ground again, and resumed his attempt at explanation. "Ye see, 'Liz'beth, ye've been so kind t' me that I know it ain't right fer me t' go away without tellin' ye why.

I've jest told yer pappy, an' he"— David broke off in confusion. To quote the father was to accuse the daughter of loving him unasked. An instinctive chivalry held his tongue.

But now at last the girl herself helped him a little by speaking for the first time. Her voice, though faint, was firm and even, and the eyes with which she contemplated him were brave, despite the tortured shadows in them.

"You told pappy? You must tell me, David. Why must you go?"

"I can't stay here," was the answer, spoken in a tone that was resolute for the first time during the interview, "because I belong some'eres else. There's somebody a-waitin' fer me back up there, an' I must go back home t' her." The final pronoun was uttered after a slight pause and with an inflection that was significant.

As she heard the word, Elizabeth understood everything in a lightning flash of illumination, and the pang of that knowledge pierced her to the soul. Somehow, notwithstanding her feminine intuition, she had never suspected the presence of another

woman in the life of the man that she loved. Even when she realized the existence of a barrier between them, she did not guess its nature. So, the truth came to her now with a shock that racked her to the foundation of her being. The simple statement from David meant the end of everything for her. All the light went out of her life, and left only a darkness complete and impenetrable. Under the golden tint of her complexion, a deathly pallor showed. The lids sank heavily over the eyes. It was as if her soul were exhaled in the sigh that passed so softly from her lips.

David heard the sound of that gentle breath, and looked toward her again. He saw her with shut eyes, swaying a little where she sat. He took a step forward to clasp her, fearful lest she fall. But he checked himself, as he saw the form grow tense again by the girl's own effort of will. Yet, though he held back from her, he was longing as never before to take her into his arms, to comfort her, to assuage the mortal hurt he himself had given her, with words and kisses. He did not yield to his desire because he knew that to do so would mean in the end an in-

crease of the agony she must suffer. Moreover, he knew that he must restrain his impulse for his own sake as well as for hers. There was no thought in his mind now that this girl belonged to a people strange to him, whose ways were not his ways. There was no feeling of revolt in his heart now because of her father's savagery. Once again, the glamour was on him. Even in her misery, the magnetism of her presence stole upon him, and held him in thrall. He tore away his eyes from her face lest the pathetic appeal of it should destroy his resolve. So, he did not see her eyes unclose, did not know the searching sadness in the girl's long scrutiny of him. Her voice startled him with a question, spoken very feebly, yet with a demand not to be denied. And it was a question that caught him in the moment when he was least prepared. It came, though hardly louder than a whisper, like a fierce cry from his own conscience.

“Do you—love her?”

It was his own cowardice that drove David to answer promptly, decisively—fear of his own weakness, which might still further increase her misery. He spoke with

a coldness that covered the effort of self-restraint.

"Yes." And then he added, as if to confirm a faltering purpose for his own sake: "Yes, I love her—I love Ruth—my Ruth."

It was as if the word held a spell to evoke a vision of serenest joy. He saw again the orchard back there on the farm, saw the fawn issue from the thicket and stand regarding him with placid eyes, saw the face of Ruth as she parted the branches, and looked out from the frame of foliage at him. Then his manhood had not known the rich gifts her lips had to offer. Afterward he had learned. The memory of their kisses came to him now. The memory was a delight, and in it he forgot all other longing in a poignant desire to be with Ruth again.

Something in David's expression must have told the truth to Elizabeth. A spasm of physical pain distorted her features for an instant, which had its source in her heart. Then she asserted her strength, and her expression became one of sorrowful resignation, yet with something in it that hinted of a soul undaunted, even though the heart were broken. She stood up, as if to show that

there was no need of further discussion. And her words were of like effect.

"You must go to her."

The brief utterance, spoken so quietly and so unfalteringly, contained all of a woman's mightiest sacrifice. It was her renunciation of her own happiness, her gift at a cost beyond words to that other, unknown woman, who had first claim on the man she loved. Perhaps Elizabeth believed her own powers of attraction strong enough to draw this man to her and to hold him against the world. She knew nothing of the effect on him of her father's violence, which had included indirectly a certain distaste for her, too, as one of the same blood, as one of a people strange to him, whose ways were not his ways. But, though the princess might have faith in her ability to rule David's heart at her will, and though every atom of her being was vibrant to win his love, she rose above all selfish desire from pure purpose toward the right, and bade him go whither he was in duty bound.

She had no need to pour out all her heart in a torrent of words, to tell how deeply she loved him, how tremendous was the suffering

inflicted by her sacrifice. It was all written on her face, in the tremulous, drooping curves of her scarlet lips, in the clouded deeps of the eyes. David, shaken by clashing emotions, did not see, for he could not bear to look at her in this supreme moment. But there was another who did see.

Ruth, from her hiding place, not only heard every word spoken by the two, but her astonished gaze noted every revelation of Elizabeth's love and self-abnegation. The sight filled her with penitence for the injustice she had done this other girl in her thoughts. She was filled with pity and sympathy for the torment of which she was so innocently the cause. But chiefly it was shame that moved her—shame that she should so have misjudged a fellow-woman, who suffered so sorely, yet endured her suffering with such nobility of character. All her personal dread, grown greater at first sight of her rival's loveliness, had vanished on hearing David's declaration that he still loved her. Her later emotion had little to do with self, little to do with David. It was all concerned with this other, whose misery Ruth could understand out of her own agony in the last

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few days. Of a sudden, she felt that she must go to the girl, must try to help her in the hour of need by tenderest sympathy.

Ruth acted on the impulse at once. She issued from the concealment of the bushes, and went swiftly toward the two by the spring.

CHAPTER XXIV

CRIMSON burned in Elizabeth's cheeks at the first appearance of the figure from out the screen of flaunting-hued foliage, and her dark eyes flashed angrily. She thought it was one of the Croatan girls, who had been eavesdropping. But, in the same moment, she perceived her mistake; for this was no member of the tribe, but an utter stranger, who came toward her so swiftly, with such a resolute air. She was startled out of her usual poise by the apparition of a white girl there in the wilderness, who, as she noted in quick, comprehensive survey, was well-dressed and ladylike, beautiful of face and of form. In her surprise, the princess uttered a stifled ejaculation, which caused David to look toward her. He observed the expression of amazement on her face, and turned his head to follow the direction of her eyes. He saw Ruth, hardly two yards distant from him, coming forward with hurried steps, her

cheeks glowing, her violet eyes suffused with tenderness as they met his. A mighty emotion shook him, in which were blended astonishment and delight. His face whitened for a moment, and he trembled. He strode toward her. Her name burst from his lips in a shout of joy.

“Ruth!”

The speaking of the name revealed much, if not all, to Elizabeth. She understood that somehow it had come to pass that the girl to whom David was pledged was here before her. How or why Ruth had come was a mystery beyond her solving. But it seemed to the princess just then that the reason mattered not at all. The fact of her successful rival’s being there was the only thing of importance. In her present mood of despair and renunciation, it seemed to Elizabeth that the coming of this other girl was indeed a fitting climax to her talk with David. She recognized with a pang of final hopelessness, from David’s voice and manner as he went forward, that he did in truth love this girl to whom he was bound, that she herself had neither part nor lot in his heart’s desire. She had known it before, but she felt its

verity anew with an intolerable ache when it was presented thus visibly before her eyes. She saw Ruth swept into David's arms, saw their lips meet and linger. She turned her gaze away, unable to bear the spectacle of that fond meeting. She stood with brooding eyes turned unseeing toward the western horizon, where great banks of storm clouds shut out the last rays of the setting sun. A little breeze touched her with the chill autumn air of nightfall. It seemed to pierce through her heart with an icy coldness. She stood bereft, solitary, in desolation. And in her ears reverberated discordantly the hushed murmurs of the lovers' voices.

It was an eternity to Elizabeth while she stood there apart, isolated in her anguish. Yet, it was for no more than a few seconds that Ruth forgot all else in the bliss of reunion with David. Then she recalled the purpose that had driven her out of hiding. She felt again the impulse of atonement toward this woman whom she had so bitterly feared and condemned in her thoughts—and so unjustly. Her own instinct taught her how dreadful must be the suffering inflicted on Elizabeth by witnessing this meeting be-

tween her and David. Ruth knew the secret of the princess' heart, though she knew, too, that she must never betray her knowledge. But by as much as her own happiness was great, by so much her heart went out in pity toward the one whom that happiness left forlorn. So, she withdrew herself from David's embrace, though he sought to restrain her. She went straight to the princess, and threw her arms about the wondering girl, and kissed her warmly.

"I know," she explained hastily, before the other could summon a word of question, "you are the princess. I have heard. You saved David from the river. I owe him to you. I owe—everything to you." The last words came impetuously.

Perhaps Elizabeth divined in some degree the significance contained in them. Perhaps she gained from them a clue to Ruth's appreciation of the fact of her own renunciation. Anyhow, the warm gratitude of Ruth brought to Elizabeth the first touch of comfort in her misery, and her words told her appreciation frankly. An instantaneous liking developed between the two, in spite of the reasons that existed for mutual distrust and

jealousy. The nobility of the princess' character raised her superior to blaming this other girl for the grievous wound inflicted on her by fate. And Ruth appreciated that nobility, which she had learned through her eyes and ears while in hiding, and trusted to it, knowing that her happiness was safe in the generosity of this other.

They were interrupted by David, who, unmindful of Elizabeth for the time, plied Ruth with questions concerning her presence. It was with judicious reserve that Ruth explained the reasons of her coming. She told of the visit of Morris to her grandfather's home, and of hearing from him the story as to David's river adventure and Elizabeth's part in it. She carefully avoided any reference to the vicious insinuations of the soldier concerning her lover and the princess, or to her own jealousy and alarm lest that lover be stolen away from her. David was satisfied with the narrative, and did not guess that aught was concealed. He exulted in this proof of his sweetheart's devotion. It gratified his pride that she should have thus taken the hazards of a journey alone through the wilderness. If Elizabeth suspected aught

that lay beneath the surface of Ruth's account, she showed no sign, either then or afterward.

After a little, Elizabeth fell silent, absorbed in troubled thought, while the other two continued talking. She spoke presently in a tone that arrested instant attention and apprehension.

"I don't like to say it," she began abruptly; "it seems so awfully inhospitable. But there are reasons," she went on hurriedly, rather shamefacedly. She did not particularize beyond a vague statement. "It's pappy, you know."

David uttered an exclamation under his breath. For the first time since the appearance of Ruth on the scene, he remembered the plans to which the chief of the Croatans was devoted, and he guessed immediately the cause of the daughter's evident concern over the situation that had developed. But he was at a loss as to what course should be pursued, and waited for Elizabeth to continue.

"Pappy's strange in some ways," the girl resumed, speaking with evident constraint, as if her lack of candor made her explana-

tion difficult and distasteful. "I think—" she turned to David appealingly, as if hoping that he might understand without more explicit words from her—"I think it would be better for you two to go—to start away—at once."

She noted the look of pained surprise on Ruth's face, and stretched out her hands appealingly.

"You can't understand, of course," she said sorrowfully. "You must take my word for it. I hate more than I can tell you to send you away so. But it is best—safest. It's on pappy's account. He has dreadful rages sometimes. His red rages, the tribe calls them." The beautiful face flushed with embarrassment. "He hates strangers—sometimes! So, I think you ought to go away together—at once. It will be safer so."

Ruth's face still wore an expression of hurt surprise, but she ventured no comment; only glanced toward David inquiringly. David, however, nodded assent. He appreciated to the full the solicitude of the princess in their behalf. He meant that her advice should be followed in so far as it concerned Ruth. In regard to himself, the matter was

altogether different. Such a simple solution of the difficulty could not be applied in his own case. Of this Elizabeth knew nothing, for she had not yet learned of what had occurred between him and her father. He would have preferred to keep silence as to this interview, but that was now rendered impossible by the necessity of immediate action for Ruth's sake.

This was clearly indicated in Elizabeth's next utterance.

"Pappy mustn't even see Ruth. I can't tell you just why. But I know—I know!"

David spoke rapidly, his voice authoritative.

"Yes, Ruth must go at once. The princess is right," he said to the astonished girl. "It would be safer fer ye t' go. Yes, Ruth, ye must start out at once."

"You mean, *we* must go," the girl corrected.

"Yes, both of you, of course," Elizabeth declared.

But David shook his head. His face was set in lines of grim determination.

"No, Ruthie, I can't go with ye. I hate t' think o' ye ridin' all by yer lonesome

through the woods, but it can't be he'ped.
I've got t' stay on here fer a week yit."

Ruth cried out in indignant reproach. The crisp "Why?" of the princess cut through the queries of the other girl, and David turned toward her to answer. He spoke so harshly that she winced; for the memory of her father's treatment of him filled him with resentment.

"I give yer pappy my word t' stay on here fer seven days. I had t' promise him," he added, with a vindictive scowl at the memory.

Elizabeth had no need of further explanation. She surmised readily enough the essentials of that interview which had resulted in David's forced giving of his parole. A hot flush of shame mantled her cheeks as she realized the indignity that her father, who loved her, had all unwittingly put upon her. She realized, too, to some extent at least, the harm her father's violence must work in David's estimate of her, the daughter. It had seemed to her that she was experiencing the acme of torment; yet at this thought she felt a new pang. The harshness in David's voice as he spoke to her was like a lash on her naked soul.

Ruth felt her earlier indignation die. She was influenced by the gravity of the other two, distressed and terrified by the menace of unknown perils. She was aghast that David must remain exposed to those dangers of which she had dreamed, from which she had come to rescue him. But she was still moved by the great relief from dread of the worst danger—that of any evil from the woman she had so misjudged. Nevertheless, she was distraught at the idea of leaving David, while she sought safety in flight. She remonstrated vehemently, but to no avail. She pleaded with her lover to accompany her, notwithstanding his pledge to remain. Elizabeth joined with her in entreaties. She urged that his promise was not binding, since it was given under duress. David, however, was obdurate. He resisted both argument and prayers. In the end, the two girls recognized the fact that he was not to be turned from his purpose of holding fast to his word.

It was Elizabeth who became convinced first, and by her assurances Ruth was at last prevailed upon to yield to the inevitable, and to take her departure from the encampment forthwith. For the princess pledged herself

to save David from any harm. She asserted that she would have power to mold her father to her will. While neither she nor any could curb him in the frenzy of a red rage, she would be able to soothe him and finally to sway him as his wrath diminished. She gave Ruth her promise to guard the young man, and to secure his speedy release from the encampment, his speedy return to the sweetheart, who would be waiting so anxiously for him.

There were kisses and tears between the two girls at parting. Elizabeth had decided it would be wiser for Ruth to go as she had come, quite alone, without having David to accompany her to where her horse waited; since there were probably spies watching the young man with instructions to prevent his leaving the encampment. That she was correct in this supposition was soon to be proven in disastrous fashion.

When Elizabeth and Ruth had finished their farewells, the princess turned, and took up the pail, and filled it at the spring, and then walked with it swiftly through the gathering dusk toward the cabin. She felt that the limit of her strength had been

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reached. It seemed to her that, if she were to see them again in each other's arms, she must go mad. She had the strength of soul to sacrifice herself, to give the man she loved to another; but she had not the strength to look again on their rapture.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN he returned to the cabin, after his parting with Ruth, David found no one in the living-room, which pleased him, for he was anxious to be alone a little while to meditate on the strange and vital happenings of the day. His worst anxiety had been relieved by Elizabeth's definite assurances of securing his release. Freed from worry on this score, he was able to enjoy to the full the pleasure that had been caused him by Ruth's appearance. His heart was at peace for the first time in many days, because he no longer doubted his entire love for the girl to whom he had plighted his troth. He filled his pipe, and sat smoking with great contentment. Just then, he had little thought to spare for the girl on whom he had involuntarily inflicted suffering so severe. He had, indeed, little thought for himself. He was thinking intently, with warm tenderness in his heart, of Ruth, of the lovelight in her violet

eyes when she had looked at him, of the soft sweetness of her lips when they had lain on his.

David aroused with a start when the cabin door banged open, and the chief stamped noisily into the room. A single glance at Lowrie was enough to shatter all of his newfound tranquillity.

The leader of the tribe was in one of his red rages. The man's appearance left no doubt of the fact. The great chest was heaving convulsively like that of a man who has just run a race. The huge hands were balled into fists. But it was the face that awed the mountaineer, and moved him to new fear for his own safety. The skin was empurpled. The muscles were twitching. The lips were drawn back in a grin of ferocity. The eyes were bloodshot, narrowed to slits, with the pupils pin points of flame. He had left the door open behind him, and David could see gathered beyond the threshold a half-dozen of the tribesmen, whose black eyes as they watched gleamed with malevolence.

Lowrie halted a pace distant from David, and stood for a moment glaring in fury. Then his voice came in a bellow.

"I'll l'arn ye t' go a-kissin' gals round hyar, ye damn' whelp! I'll hev ye put whar ye'll be shet o' thet." He beckoned swiftly toward the men at the door. "Grab 'im, an' throw 'im inter the guard-house afore I take my han's t' 'im!"

The men surged forward, laid hold on David, and hustled him out of the room, while the chief stood by, shaking with the wrath that was on him, and cursing horribly, but holding back by a mighty effort from an actual assault. The mountaineer made no resistance whatsoever. He was only anxious to be quit of the frantic man before worse befell. He did not see Elizabeth, who in her room had been disturbed by her father's cries, and had come out just as David was dragged from the cabin.

The girl faced her father intrepidly.
"For shame, pappy!" she exclaimed.
"You shouldn't treat David so."

But Lowrie was past caring for aught save the hate that boiled within him. Even Elizabeth had no power now to turn his anger aside. He stared at her without any softening in the fierceness of his expression.

"Git inter yer room, gal!" he commanded.

"Git, if ye don't want t' be carried thar, an' tied up."

Elizabeth turned, and went out in silence, without any attempt at further protest. She knew the heaviness of his hand, and she knew that his threat was not idly spoken. Her effort to influence him must await a more fitting season.

David passed a wretched night, bolted within the tiny, windowless cabin, which served as a jail for the settlement. The distress of his situation was the worse by contrast with the high anticipations that had filled him at the moment when the crash came. Apprehensions as to what his fate might be thronged upon him. It seemed to him that his only hope lay in Elizabeth's intervention, but he despaired of success in this direction, for he had heard the manner of Lowrie's speech to his daughter. A surly jailer gave him food and drink in the morning, but would not answer a word to his questions. The weary hours wore on with fearful slowness until the youth was almost crazed with the desperateness of his plight. For now he feared, not only for his own fate, but for what might menace Ruth. Evidently, the

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chief had learned of her presence. He might have ordered her to be pursued, to be captured, to be reserved for any fate that his insane malice might devise. With morbid imagination, David could only guess as to what might be happening, while he was shut helpless within the walls of his prison.

Night came again. Another meal was set before him in silence. It was not until nearly midnight, as he reckoned the time, that a change came. Then he heard a murmur of voices outside the cabin door. They ceased presently. He heard the noise of the bolt shot back, and the door opened. Elizabeth entered, carrying a lantern, and shut the door behind her.

"You are free to go, David," she said quietly, with an undernote of sadness in her voice.

David sprang to her, and caught her free hand in a warm clasp.

"Ye've talked yer pappy over!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think it could be done. I 'lowed they wa'n't nothin' could stop him—not even you-all, 'Liz'beth.'" But his joyous smile over the unexpected news faded as he perceived the gravity of her face.

The girl shook her head.

"No," she replied. "Pappy rode off somewhere this morning, and hasn't come back yet. I lied to the guards for your sake, David. I told them that pappy had ordered your release. They believed me, because I have never lied before. The way is open for you now, David. But you must go at once. There's not an instant to lose. Pappy may come any minute." Her tone was urgent, with a tremor of anxiety in it.

"But will it be safe fer you-all?" David demanded. "Won't yer pappy take it out on ye fer gittin' me off this-away?"

The girl shook her head once again.

"No," was her ready answer. "Pappy will be calmed down, I reckon, by the time he gets back, and I'll be able to smooth things over." Then she spoke swiftly, with new insistence. "But you must hurry, David. You mustn't waste time in talking. You must go now—now! Do you hear?"

He yielded, though somewhat reluctantly. He was fearful for her, yet half-convinced by her protestations. He failed to understand that it was not so much alarm over the prospect of her father's speedy return that incited

her to hasten his going as it was the knowledge that her self-control was near the breaking point. She had already endured so much pain that it seemed more than she could bear —this final parting from the man she loved. She was all a-tremble with longing to throw herself into his arms, to weep her heart out on his breast. But she forced herself to speak in passionless tones, to gaze at him dry-eyed. Her manner showed nothing of the torture within her. But that torture sapped her strength, and so she ordered him to be gone with all haste, before her strength should come to an end. She guided him to a horse, which she had in waiting a little way out on the river-trail, with rations fastened to the saddle.

“You must hurry,” were her last words, “and overtake Ruth.”

They parted with a handclasp. As he rode away into the night, David’s heart was warm with gratitude to Elizabeth, warmer with love for another. But the heart in the breast of the girl whom he left behind him was cold as she turned and walked back alone through the darkness—cold with the coldness of death.

CHAPTER XXVI

RUTH was so tired by the excitement through which she had passed that she deemed it unwise to begin her long journey that night. She was confirmed in this decision by the fact that it was almost dark when she reached the spot where the horse was tethered. She cooked her meal, and immediately afterward went to sleep in her blanket. That she was indeed excessively fatigued was proven by her sleeping soundly until mid-forenoon of the next day. Then she breakfasted hurriedly, and set forth. Yet, though thus delayed, she did not force her horse's pace. Somehow, she found herself unable to hurry the animal that was bearing her away from David. So, she rode slowly, pondering many things, and chief among them the strange girl whose suffering, she knew, was the measure of her own happiness. She halted and cooked another meal late in the afternoon, and once more pressed for-

ward. It was near night when she noticed the quick flexing of her horse's ears, and in the next second her own caught a moan that sounded from somewhere beyond the under-brush that lined one side of the trail. She reined in the horse, and sat listening. The moaning continued. It was plainly close at hand. At first, a natural fear was begotten in the girl by the mysterious noise. But the indication of suffering was so evident that soon sympathy triumphed over alarm. She dismounted, and, after making fast the bridle-rein to a branch, cautiously advanced in the direction of the sound. As she stepped through the barrier of bushes, she saw the figure of a man lying on the ground amid the long grass of a little open place in the wood. He was of great size, and very powerful, she judged. There was something impressive in the massive features and thick-growing gray hair and beard. The lids beneath the shaggy brows were fast shut, and he lay inert as if unconscious, but he moaned continually. Ruth looked closer, and perceived that one trouser leg was splotched with a blackening crimson. The sight distressed her, but it moved her to a more active display

of sympathy. She went forward, and knelt on the turf by the injured man. Her questions, however, provoked no response. She bethought herself of the flask at her saddle. She hastily procured it, and managed with much difficulty to get a considerable quantity of the spirits down the man's throat.

The effect was immediate. The lids unclosed, and two black eyes stared balefully up into her face. A sonorous voice came rumbling roughly.

“Who the devil be you-all?”

“Never mind about me,” Ruth answered. “You’re hurt—wounded. You need help.”

“Yep. Shot through the laig. Gimme another swig.” He nearly finished the contents of the flask before he would let it go from his lips. The liquor revived him instantly. Lowrie—for the wounded man was indeed the chief—struggled into a sitting posture, in spite of the agony the exertion caused him.

“So be ye’r’ willin’ t’ he’p, ye kin tie a piece o’ yer skirt round my laig t’ stop the bleedin’.” He pulled out a clasp-knife. “Take this-hyar, an’ slit down my pants.”

Ruth obeyed willingly and deftly, for she

was both kindly and resourceful. Soon the wound was decently bandaged, and, after finally draining the flask, the Croatan gave a brief account of how he came to be in such evil case.

"Hit was thet-thar damn' skunk, Charlie Goins. I knowed 'e was thicker'n thieves with some o' the tribe. Got a bug in 'is head 'e could murder me, an' hev things all 'is own way. Laywayed me, 'e did—damn 'im t' hell! Flopped me out o' the saddle. 'E thought 'e 'd done killed me, 'cause I lay still. 'E come a-runnin'. The long grass hid my han's fr'm 'im. I pulled my revolver, an' bored 'im through the heart as 'e come up t' me. Leastways, I cal'late I got 'im plunk in the vitals, 'cause 'e didn't even squeak—jist tumbled down on 'is face like 'e was drunk, an' 'e's stayed thar ever sence." He gestured over his shoulder. "'E's thar jist back o' thet log. No need fer you-all t' pizen yer pretty eyes with lookin' at the ornery varmint. 'E's jist nacherly dead an' gone t' hell."

Then a sudden change came over him. He regarded the shocked girl fixedly, his brows bending in a frown. He repeated his first

question, with a harsh command in his tone.

"Who be ye, gal?" His expression hardened. Before the girl could answer him, a curse burst from his lips. His voice came in a roar. "Ye'r' a stranger hyar. Ye'r' thet-thar gal they tol' me 'bout what was a-huggin' an' a-kissin' on David. I know ye now. Ye'r' thet-thar slut—cuss ye!"

Ruth, who was still kneeling beside the man, sprang to her feet. For a moment, her face blanched. Then the red of anger suffused it. She threw back her head, and stood posed contemptuously, looking down with cold disdain on the man she had succored. Her voice as she spoke was metallic.

"And I know you. You're that horrible old Indian chief, who wanted to harm my David. I'm right sorry I found you. I've done what I could for you so far. It's more than you deserve."

The bluster was gone out of Lowrie's voice when he next spoke, though he made no effort to placate her.

"An' now ye've done yer duty, ye kin ride away, an' leave me t' rot hyar. Wall, go on—git out!"

"I'll ride to your village, and bring help

back," Ruth said, without any hesitation. "I hope you quite understand. I'm doing this from a sense of duty, because I have to." Abruptly, her eyes sparkled angrily. "I hope," she concluded fiercely, "you'll be dead before I get back."

The chief looked after her without resentment as she rode away. Her spirit had wiped out his wrath, had provoked him to admiration. Moreover, in spite of his flare of temper, he was profoundly grateful to the girl to whom he owed any chance of life that he might have. Ruth, unknowing Lowrie's later feeling toward her, put her horse to a gallop, not so much for the wounded man's sake as to be the sooner done with a distasteful task. The night fell as she rode back over the way she had come, but the moon soon rose, and she was able to proceed at a rapid pace. She had covered perhaps half the distance to the encampment when she heard the sound of horse's hoofs approaching. She pulled her mount to a standstill, and waited with a sensation of great relief. It occurred to her that she could guide this wayfarer to the injured man, and so be quit of her duty in the matter. She called out hello as the

horseman drew near. In the answering hail, to her amazement and joy, she recognized David's voice.

The mutual surprise of the lovers over this unexpected encounter could not mitigate their pleasure in it, nor lessen the ardor of their greeting. Ruth explained hastily the reason for her presence, whereupon David found himself confronted with a serious difficulty. He was by no means inclined to return to the Croatan settlement. To do so would be to run the risk of imprisonment or worse. Nevertheless, his conscience spoke in no uncertain voice. Like Ruth, he realized perfectly just where his duty lay. He could not leave even a dog to die unattended by his voluntary choice, much less the man whom he considered with justice, since Goins was dead, his worst enemy. He did not feel that he could permit Ruth to go on to the encampment without him, to seek other assistance. There was, in addition, the matter of time. It might be that a few hours' delay would cause the death of the wounded man. He could not tell. But he had no right to subject another to such a risk unnecessarily. Though he debated the question carefully

within himself, the issue was at no time in doubt. He told Ruth his decision: That the two of them should go to Lowrie, and bring him on David's horse back to his home.

"An' I hate him like pizen!" David grumbled, as they rode off together.

"Me, too!" Ruth admitted, with a smile. "He said horrid things to me."

On the tablets of memory David splashed another black mark against the account of the Croatan chief.

"But I guess I was as bad as he was," Ruth continued penitently. "Of course, I didn't really mean it. I told him I hoped he'd die before I got back."

Despite the tragedy that hemmed them in, David roared with laughter, in which, somewhat shamefacedly, Ruth presently joined.

* * * * *

The dawn was just breaking when the three entered the Croatan encampment. Lowrie, after the curse with which he had greeted David's appearance, had not uttered a word throughout the tedious hours, although he had acted obediently according to every suggestion from the young man. The task of getting him into the saddle had taxed the

strength of the two to the utmost. Finally, his weakness had become such that he could not support himself unaided. Thereafter, Ruth had walked, while David, mounted on her horse, had sustained the chief in his arms. As they rode up to the cabin door, Ruth was tottering from fatigue; David was almost equally exhausted from the long-continued strain of holding up the huge, inert bulk of the wounded man. Lowrie himself was unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVII

E LIZABETH, who had not slept that night, was speedily aroused, and at once took efficient charge of the situation. A tribesman, with some rude skill in surgery, worked over the chief to extract the bullet, and washed and dressed the wound. Ruth was given a share of Elizabeth's bed. David volunteered to watch with the sick man, in spite of the weariness that weighed heavily upon him. Lowrie throughout had maintained a sullen silence after regaining consciousness, except for a string of mumbled curses while the wound was being probed. The stillness was too much for David's resolve to keep awake. He fell asleep, presently, sitting in the chief's big armchair, and slept soundly until daybreak. He awoke to find himself aching and cramped, but much refreshed. He was relieved by the fact that Lowrie also was asleep. He supposed that the sufferer like himself had slumbered for

hours. In truth, however, the chief, irritated by the fever of his wound, had not closed his eyes until almost daybreak. His brain had been whirling with a confusion of thoughts strange to him, and his heart had been curiously stirred with new emotions. But he betrayed nothing of this. When he awoke, his manner was still forbidding, surly and taciturn. David suspected no weakening in the brutal animosity of the man toward himself and toward Ruth. It may be, nevertheless, that the more discerning eyes of the princess were able to read the truth lying back of that stern and gloomy exterior. It is certain, at least, that she had the courage to confront him boldly, without pretense, or any attempt at palliation of her audacity.

Ruth and David were talking softly together in one end of the room, while Elizabeth was at her father's bedside. There was no one else present. Elizabeth beckoned them to approach. They obeyed, much mystified, and stood hand in hand at the foot of the bed. Lowrie glowered at them, but uttered no word. It was his daughter who, looking down on him with fearless eyes, only a little dimmed by the great sorrow in her

soul, spoke very gently, the music of her voice half-pleading, half-commanding.

"Pappy, David and Ruth are going now. I want you to tell them for yourself, they're free to go."

The face of the prostrate chief purpled. It was the first time in all his life that his authority had been flaunted, had been usurped by another. Resentment burned hot within him. But only for a few seconds. Then the color faded slowly from his face, and the fires in the eyes he had turned on his daughter were quenched. Yet he spoke no word, only continued staring at her with questioning gaze as if demanding more.

Elizabeth answered the mute inquiry. Her voice now was colorless. She spoke in a level tone, mechanically. It was as if she reasoned coldly, without any trace of emotion. It was thus only that she could speak at all.

"You claimed David owed me his life, because I saved him. But you didn't understand, pappy. I don't want David's life—" she hesitated for an instant, with a catch of the breath—"I really don't want David. He belongs to Ruth, and he loves her. And it

would break Ruth's heart to lose him, because she loves him so." She did not say that she knew the truth of this from the anguish within her own breast. "You see, pappy, if it's true that David owes me his life, it's just as true that you owe your life to Ruth. But she doesn't want your life. She wants David's. So, because you owe her a life, you must give David back to her."

For a full minute, the chief rested motionless and silent, regarding his daughter with somber eyes. Then his gaze shifted to the two standing at the foot of the bed. The grim face lightened a little as he studied Ruth.

"Ye hoped I'd die afore ye got back. I don't aim t' oblige ye none by dyin'," he rumbled. A hoarse chuckle followed the words. "But I'll oblige ye by givin' ye thet-thar feller o' your'n. An' good rideance!" Having so said, Lowrie turned his face to the wall without another word or glance.

There were hasty farewells between Elizabeth and the lovers. The parting of the girls was tender with kisses, and there were tears in the eyes of both. But the parting of David

and Elizabeth was constrained, hastened and made formal by the emotions which each felt.

As the lovers rode away down the street and out of the encampment into the river-trail, David's heart was heavy within him. Once again in memory came the thrill of those wonderful hours with the princess in the cavern. Once again the glamour of that passion lay over him. By stern effort of will, he turned his thoughts from such recollections, which were a treachery to the girl at his side. But he knew that in the days to come the memory would linger always—the memory of a woman sweet and strong and exquisite, who loved him. He sighed impatiently. Then he remembered the chief, at whose hand she had suffered so much. He sighed again, with relief that he had seen the last of the reckless and savage autocrat. There was subtle comfort to him in the knowledge that the princess, adorable as she was, was one of a strange people, whose ways were not his ways. He glanced at the radiant face of the girl beside him; and his comfort was complete. After all, he loved Ruth, and her only; and her people were his people, and her ways, his ways.

The girl was bubbling over with delight. Even sympathy for Elizabeth could not weigh down the lightness of her spirits. But she was not unmindful of the one to whom she owed so much, as her words proved.

"Elizabeth has promised to pay me a long visit sometime." She laughed a little, a ripple of music. "You know, David, I owe the princess a life—yours, David. I'm going to pay with another life—the way she made her pappy pay."

David looked puzzled, and Ruth laughed again at his bewilderment. Then she explained, with the utmost seriousness.

"I'm going to find a husband for Elizabeth, and give him to her to pay my debt. Anyhow," she added indignantly, "she's much too good for any of those Indians."

And David, though he said nothing, agreed with her.

"I feel pretty small, goin' back t' yer pappy, Ruth," David confessed, "without the money t' pay fer them apples." His face was lugubrious.

Ruth smiled on him reassuringly.

"I forgot to tell you, David. Pappy's had

a letter from your pappy. He's been exchanged, and is coming home. And—and—" she hesitated, and her face grew rosy—"well, he's anxious to have you run things, and—" She broke off in confusion.

David smiled on her understandingly in his turn.

"Wants me t' marry an' settle down, p'r'aps?" he suggested quizzically.

Ruth nodded, her face even rosier than before.

"I'm sorry yer pappy's got a grudge agin me," David said, with a return to seriousness.

But Ruth shook her head in vehement denial.

"Pappy hasn't any grudge. He's shown how sorry he was to mammy and me—and Mollie. You don't need to worry about that, David."

The sweet cadences of her laughter rang again.

"And I know what pappy's going to give you for a wedding present, David."

"What?" he demanded.

"A whole load of limber-twig apples."

"The same having already been deliv-

ered," David added, and joined in her laughter.

On a little rise of the road, by a common instinct, the lovers drew rein, and looked back toward the encampment, which nestled snugly within the frame of woodland foliage, now dimming from its autumnal splendors. They could not make out the figure of the girl who stood solitary and desolate by the spring, looking with pain-blinded eyes toward the vast spaces of the sky.

The lovers gazed back for a moment. Then, without a word, their eyes turned to each other in tenderness, and their lips smiled from the happiness that was in their hearts as they rode forward on the homeward trail.

THE END.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author has adapted the facts in the life of Henry Lowrie to suit the purposes of the story. Otherwise, references to the Croatans are historically correct.

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